THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

DRAGONS, FAIRIES, AND TIME:

IMAGINING THE PAST IN MEDIEVAL WELSH, PERSIAN, AND FRENCH

NARRATIVES

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BY

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For Henry and Erna Lasman

עליהם השלום

Yes, we are beginning to encounter ourselves… as multi-species beings already partaking in timescales that are fabulously more complex than the onwards-driving version of history many of us still imagine ourselves to inhabit.

—Robert MacFarlane, *Underland*

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Abstract

Dragons, Fairies, and Time: Imagining the Past in Medieval Welsh, Persian, and French Narratives explores how speculative modes informed imaginative writing about the past in three medieval literary ecosystems. It begins by positing that the modern category of speculative fiction can be expanded to include the imaginative literature of the past, and that the global Middle Ages can be conceptualized not only in terms of concrete linkages but also as a particular project of identity-building occurring in parallel among disparate groups. The intersection of these categories suggests that an imaginative engagement with the past was key to medieval sociocultural formations, providing the basis for the rest of my argument.

The first macro-chapter, "Past and Paradox: What Did It Mean to Time-Travel in Medieval Wales?" discusses four Middle Welsh texts—*Culhwch ac Olwen*, *Branwen ferch Llyr*, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, and Dafydd ap Gwilym's poem "Yr Adfail"—as representations of weirded time. In these works, characters journey into the distant past and project themselves forward to the end of the universe in ways that critique the notion of a stable and recoverable history. The second, "Hostile Others: What Did It Mean to Battle the Draconic in the Medieval Iranian World?" considers the *azhdahā*, a monstrous reptilian creature of Persian epic, not as an atavistic remnant of Indo-European mythology but rather as the poetic innovation of medieval poets writing in Persian. Ferdowsi, Asadi-Tusi, and Iranshāh use the *azhdahā* to interrogate ideas of human historical agency vis-à-vis nature, technology, and sexuality. Lastly, "Seductive Others: What Did It Mean to Love the Otherworldly in Old French *Lais*?" explores six of the Old French "Breton *lais*"—Marie de France's *Guigemar, Yonec*, and *Lanval*, and the anonymous *Tydorel, Graelent*, and *Guingamor*. In these poems, men and women become involved in sexual liaisons with parahuman denizens of parallel worlds. These relationships insert irreducible strangeness into earthly genealogies while occulting chosen humans into zones of unattainable alterity.

Acknowledgements

Many, many people have had a hand (or two) in getting this project across the finish line. These few words of thanks don't do justice to their contributions, but their support is threaded throughout the pages that follow—sometimes visible in the citations themselves, much more often worked into the fabric of the thing.

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Over the past six years, I have been extraordinarily lucky to have studied with a heroic roster of professors. They have taught me languages and methods, introduced me to cultures past and present, fielded countless questions, and critiqued essays which underlie more than one section of this dissertation. Catherine McKenna welcomed me to Harvard, to Welsh, and to the wonders of the *Mabinogi* with open arms. Richard Payne's mentorship in the course of his seminar on the Sāsāniān was indispensable to my scholarly confidence and my appreciation of

My students in "Uncanny Encounters in Medieval Literature" are a truly exceptional group. Their enthusiasm and insight led me to new appreciations of many of the texts explored here.

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To my parents, Ann and Dan, I truly owe everything. Their love and support have enabled me to explore this and other worlds while remaining rooted in life's essential values. My

General Introduction

Speculative Fiction in the Global Middle Ages

A long time ago, a charismatic young warrior went hunting. He found himself chasing an animal that led him onto unfamiliar ground. Shortly, he found himself at a fortress of unsurpassed beauty. Inside was a woman, equally stunning. She seemed uncannily independent from the complex social systems that structured the warrior's world; she possessed an ineffable power that his language struggled to contain. Speaking with her dramatically altered his destiny.

This quintessentially medieval scene seems to possess a number of culturally specific tropes: the linkage of martial prowess with youth and fame; the hunt which acts as a conduit from familiar to strange lands; the castle as both ornamented palace and forbidding stronghold; the parahuman beauty whose nobility is both exemplary and unsettling, and whose words induce a headlong narrative teleology; and the narrator's siting of the entire supernatural encounter in a historical past. But this scene does not belong to any particular medieval culture. Among innumerable other texts from a plethora of languages, it occurs in the anonymous Welsh *Mabinogi* of *Pwyll Pendefig Dyfed*; the Persian *Shāhnāmeh* of Ferdowsi, *Haft Paykar* of Nezāmi Ganjavi, and *Samak-e 'Ayyār* of Farāmarz ebn-e Khodādād; the Old French *Guigemar* of Marie de France and the anonymous *Guingamor*.

My schematic summary of course obscures many differences among these narratives. The questing beast itself may be magical or mundane, or even another character in disguise. The woman is sometimes the object of the young man's quest, sometimes merely a helper along the way, sometimes a villainous deceiver. The tale may end in marriage, in tears, or in a journey through time. But despite these caveats, there is a striking degree of convergence in the essential

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motifs of this scene. Rather than any common ancestry from primordial origins, intercultural borrowing, or joint investment in a collective unconscious, these similarities suggest ways in which writers across the medieval world used speculative encounters with the unknowable to inflect their depictions of the historical past.

The tale of the hunter and the woman is far from the sole focus of this project. Indeed, its reflexes will only be discussed in any depth in the third chapter.[1] But in its evocation of the past, its deployment of the supernatural, and its cosmopolitan distribution, it epitomizes the concerns of this dissertation. In this dissertation, I explore what the relationship between temporal and ontological alterity meant for medieval imaginative literature. I do so with reference to three particular literary ecosystems—Middle Welsh (*kymraec*), New Persian (*fārsi*), and Old French (*franceis*/*romanz*)—and three motifs: weirded time, devouring monsters, and seductive parahumans. Together, these constitute my chosen representatives for what I term the speculative fiction of the global Middle Ages.

These terms are deliberately provocative. In a very real sense, the phrase is impossible, because there never were any Middle Ages, whatever Middle Ages occurred did so only in Europe, they possessed no concept of fiction as a specific kind of discourse, and even their fanciful narratives did not possess the sociopolitical force of speculation. The entire premise could easily be demolished if it warranted anything more than a dismissal.

And yet.

Medieval texts insistently attest to their own distinctive temporalities. They demand to be read in response to particular cultural formations but also globally, as products of a deeply connected and interdependent world. They invoke imaginative events and characters that

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[1] See pages 403-421 and 498-514.

willfully defy not only our standards of realism but contemporary notions of plausibility. And they speculate—continually, tragically, enchantingly—on worlds that might have been.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will address each of the terms of its title and argue for their analytical validity. The guiding questions for this inquiry, in series, might be phrased as: was there ever a medieval period? In what ways was it global? What, then, would global medieval literature be, and would it include anything that might be called fiction? And in what sense could this fiction be called speculative? Each of these is a vast topic, worthy of dissertation-length discussion on its own, and my approaches here will necessarily be somewhat cursory. My hope is that by broaching these questions in the introduction, I will establish lines along which they may be considered more fully in light of the analyses and interlinkages that follow. Having addressed these key terms, I will then turn specifically to the three literary ecosystems that this project covers, offering a brief summary of past comparative endeavors that have linked them and suggesting my own approach. Finally, I will provide an outline of the analyses that follow in this dissertation's three "macro-chapters."

Why Any Middle Ages Must Be Global

Periodization is a tool, a discourse of temporal relations, not a fact. The borders it invokes are in some sense even more artificial than those imposed on the political map, lacking the rivers, seacoasts, and mountain ranges that occasionally provide some real-world delineation for frontiers. Like land borders, furthermore, periodization is always an ideological project, and the idea of the "medieval" is no different.

It is originally an early modern Protestant formulation to refer pejoratively to the time intervening between the early Christian era and the Reformation; or, alternately, between the

glories of the Classical world and the Renaissance "rediscovery" of humanism.[2] Given these

deprecatory connotations, Alexander Murray argues that the medieval is "in many ways, some

serious, a misguided conception."[3] Against both perceptions of a "medieval stasis" and the

validity of delineating such a period at all, he points out "there was change in the Middle Ages"

and "in an important respect there was *no* change at the end of it." Scholars have promoted

successively earlier "Renaissances"—Italian, Ottonian, Carolingian, Northumbrian—extending

these further and further back until everything between Bede and Galileo seems to be part of one

or another period of scholarly and artistic revival.[4] If the medieval is to be positioned prior to the

Renaissance, then according to this scheme the former seems to vanish almost entirely. The

medieval becomes the abjected other of some different era that is always thrilled to have

emerged from it.

The original conception of the medieval thus encodes anti-medieval prejudice. Even

setting this problem aside, the definitions outlined above seem explicitly limited to the European

context. Any attempt to expand the Middle Ages to encompass other regions runs up against two

key issues: one of accuracy (the features taken to define the medieval in Europe are purely local

phenomena) and one of ethical responsibility (European standards should not be imposed upon

other locales, particularly those with a history of European colonization.) Both of these strands

surface within critiques like Candace Barrington's:

> …'medieval' cannot be accurately applied to all cultures contemporaneous with the
> European Middle Ages; that is, the term 'medieval'—bearing as it often does the stigma
> of being pre-Enlightenment—does not accurately describe the years c.700-1500 in
> African, American, Asian, or Australasian history. For many regions, these were years of
> great cultural achievement, cut short not by internal decay but by European colonization

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[2] A helpful summary of this term's history appears in Alexander Murray, "Should the Middle Ages Be Abolished?" *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21 (2004): 3-6.
[3] Murray, "Middle Ages," 17.
[4] Murray, "Middle Ages," 10.

and empire building, activities (not coincidentally) concomitant with the early modern creation of the 'medieval' as a category for locating the abject. Consequently, we cannot blithely label as 'medieval' all cultures in all places during the period between 700 and 1500… When I refer to something as 'medieval', I limit my reference to people, places, texts, and artefacts associated with the European Middle Ages.[5]

Approaches like this display an admirable desire for accuracy and a careful cultural sensitivity—even as Barrington seems to imply that the European Middle Ages were *not* "years of great cultural achievement." But more serious difficulties arrive with Barrington's final assertion: that there exist "people, places, texts, and artefacts" whose geographical associations are neatly confined to Europe. Such assumptions have long characterized medieval scholarship—albeit usually from less self-conscious and enlightened perspectives than Barrington's.

But however widely held, approaches that would confine the Middle Ages to the modern borders of Europe are always porous and so fundamentally unstable. The Crusades, for instance, have long figured as quintessential medieval events, combining fanatical religion, armored knights, and brutal violence in a mixture so irresistible it provides a foundational pillar of modern European historical fiction.[6] But rather awkwardly, these expeditions represent a centuries-long sociocultural involvement with cultures beyond Europe, principally the Muslim-majority societies of the Middle East but also a range of others: African, Central Asian, South Asian, and more. If well over half the actors in these occurrences were non-European, then it seems rather artificial to declare, for instance, that Richard I Coeur de Lion is a medieval figure, while his opponent Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb is not.[7]

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[5] Candace Barrington, "Global medievalism and translation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 184.

[6] Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe: A Romance* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1820).

[7] The clash of temporalities in any encounter of subjectivities is one of the themes of Chapter I, and there are very real ways in which Richard and Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn did inhabit different eras—for the English king, for instance, their clash at Arsūf took place on September 7, 1191 *anno domini*; for the Ayyūbi sultan, it was the 15th of Shaʻbān, 587 *sana hijriyya*. But these disjunctures support, rather than undermine, complex notions of medieval simultaneity.

Nor are the Crusades a special case. It takes only the most cursory readings of sources to see that the most stereotypical medieval pillagers were in fact precociously cosmopolitan. The Mongol invasions of Hungary (1241 CE) and Japan (1274) occurred a mere thirty-three years apart. Old Norse speakers, the "Vikings" of popular legend, ranged from Canada to Kazakhstan. Granted, in the past as in the present, most people did not stray far from home.[8] But plenty did, and their journeys, the objects they traded, the stories they told, and the diseases they carried wove together a wide and thoroughly interconnected world.

John Man, though not an academic historian, is essentially correct in noting that by the year 1000 CE, virtually the entire Earth could be linked end-to-end by a combination of local and large-scale trade networks, and it would have been theoretically possible for a piece of information to circumnavigate the globe in little more than a year[9] (even if no cases quite so dramatic actually occurred.) Janet Abu-Lughod's now-classic study *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* proposed an economic history of the later medieval world that decentered Europe in favor of complex trade linkages across the Eastern Hemisphere.[10] Abu-Lughod's analysis employs systems theory to argue against both the inevitability and the permanence of European domination, a view echoed by Bryan C. Keene: "The turn to a global Middle Ages furthermore challenges assumptions about a singular teleology or linear trajectory for Europe toward modernity…"[11] An effective, if decidedly grim,

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[8] A 2015 study of American adults, for instance, found that "[t]he typical adult lives only 18 miles from his or her mother" (Quoctrung Bui and Claire Cain Miller, "The Typical American Lives Only 18 Miles From Mom," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2015, Upshot, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/12/24/upshot/24up-family.html).

[9] John Man, *Atlas of the Year 1000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8-9.

[10] Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[11] Bryan C. Keene, "Introduction: Manuscripts and Their Outlook on the World," in *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World Through Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. Bryan C. Keene (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019), 8.

illustration of the dense interconnections of this world occurred at the end of Abu-Lughod's

titular timespan: the Black Death, the *Yersinia pestis* pandemic that devastated communities

across Asia, Africa, and Europe in the mid-fourteenth century.

Certainly, "[i]t is important to remember that any use of the terms "medieval" or "Middle

Ages" is inherently Eurocentric."[12] But it is possible to acknowledge this bias without rejecting

the possibility of positing a Middle Ages as an object of study. To insist otherwise is to remain

vulnerable to the same critique that Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema level

against Thomas Bauer's *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: Das Erbe der Antike und*

der Orient: "We consider such arguments to be based on an erroneously 'realistic' understanding

of the ontological status of historical periods." As for Bauer's insistence that any "Middle Ages"

be restricted to Western Europe, Jones, Kostick, and Oschema note that "an overwhelming

number of contributions with a 'global' focus demonstrate the value of adopting a wider

perspective."[13]

A global outlook in fact reinforces time as a primary determinant of history, over and

above culture (which in such contexts has a worrying tendency to collapse towards grimmer

articulations—race, *ethnos*, *Volk*). Indeed, such a perspective might acknowledge that the

catastrophic ruptures wrought by colonialism reify *some era* before the establishment of (to

borrow Abu-Lughod's phrase) European hegemony. Why, for example, should the Americas be

excluded from a globalized periodization "simply because they had not yet been subjected to

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[12] Keene, "Introduction," 8.

[13] Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema, "Why Should We Care about the Middle Ages? Putting the Case for the Relevance of Studying Medieval Europe," in *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medieval Studies Contribute to Improving our Understanding of the Present*, ed. Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 6.

Europe's expansionist violence?"[14] As early as 1943, Pál Kelemen entitled his monumental survey of pre-Columbian art *Medieval American Art: Masterpieces of the New World Before Columbus,* and referred to 1492 as marking "the end of medieval American civilization."[15] To adopt such terminology, perhaps, is only to surrender to the limitations of language and precedent, while inviting broader perspectives and alternatives.

This is the approach adopted by the Global Middle Ages Project (G-MAP), a leading digital scholarly initiative for the study of the world between c. 500 and 1500 CE, though these dates are no more than "a convenient heuristic rubric." A similar approach is taken to the eponymous terminology. As the project's founder and director, Geraldine Heng, writes:

> Even that elegant fable, "the Middle Ages," is embraced by us under erasure as a Eurocentric construct with little bearing for the not-Europe cultures and chronologies of the world, and perhaps with little bearing even for Europe itself. We recognized that there would be differential temporalities everywhere, that zones and cultures would be asynchronous.[16]

The implication of asynchrony, after all, is some totalizing perspective that can register temporal disjuncture. Such a perspective need not adopt an obsessively conformist attitude towards the multiplicities it encompasses. Rather, "[a] "global Middle Ages" affords recognition of the existence of more than a single scientific or industrial revolution, or a single geographic locale as the instantiating matrix… Alternative views of time, and human development, thus

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[14] Byron Ellsworth Hamann, "The Middle Ages, Middle America, and the Book," in *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World Through Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. Bryan C. Keene (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019), 71.

[15] Pál Kelemen, *Medieval American Art: Masterpieces of the New World Before Columbus* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1943), 1.

[16] Geraldine Heng, "A Global Middle Ages," in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 414. The Global Middle Ages Project is located at http://globalmiddleages.org/.

emerge…"[17] What results, ideally, is not an era made drably uniform under imposed European timescales, but rather, in Bryan C. Keen's phrase, "the polycentric and multivocal entanglements of a world without a center."[18]

The result of these and similar efforts is that it has become increasingly common for the academic "medieval," as formulated through venues such as essay collections and conference programs, to embrace a global perspective. Chaucer and his ilk may still reign at the annual Kalamazoo Medieval Conference, even as the horizons of these discussions are expanded to include the globe-spanning influences and receptions of these canonical figures.[19] But *The Canterbury Tales* now share space with discussions of Chinese monastic literature[20] and the built

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[17] Heng, "Global Middle Ages," 415.

[18] Keene, "Introduction," 31.

[19] E.g., Sophia Yashih Liu, "When East Meets West in Courtly Love: Chaucer's Squire's Tale," part of the panel "Orientalizing the Occident?: The East as a Method," (55th International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 7-10, 2020, Program (Kalamzoo, MI: Medieval Institute College of Arts and Sciences, Western Michigan University, 2020), 57); or the panel "Globalizing Joan of Arc: Positioning France's Most Famous Freedom Fighter in a Transnational Landscape," sponsored by the International Joan of Arc Society/Société Internationale de l'étude de Jeanne d'Arc (55th ICMS Program, 14). The cancellation of this conference due to the COVID-19 pandemic means that some of the panels and plenaries referenced here may take place in 2021, whereas other may never in fact occur; still, 2020 was hardly set to be an anomaly in terms of these trends.

[20] E.g., Christopher Jensen, "Perspectives on Blindness, Deafness, and Muteness in the Medieval Chinese Eminent Monks Literature," part of the panel "Disability and Sanctity in the Middle Ages" (55th ICMS Program, 181).

environment along the Swahili Coast.[21] The "Global Middle Ages" are now enshrined in the

titles of plenary lectures,[22] books,[23] job postings,[24] and degree programs.[25]

However, the question remains as to what, if anything, reifies the millennium that G-

MAP and other adopters of this label specify as their purview. Following Kelemen, I would

propose that the end of this global medieval world lies in the immense demographic, economic,

social, and environmental changes that occurred as a result of contacts between the eastern and

western hemispheres, and European colonization of the latter, in the decades[26] following 1492.[27]

To declare the epochal nature of these contacts is not to lionize the ship captains, slavers, and

conquistadors who instigated them but merely to acknowledge that the effects of these

cataclysmic events were global and far-reaching, altering everything from the languages people

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[21] E.g., Vera-Simone Schulz, "Mangrove Aesthetics along the Swahili Coast: Transcultural Dynamics and the Built Environment in Coastal East Africa," part of the panel "Diversity in/and the Global Middle Ages II" (55th ICMS Program, 100).

[22] The two plenary lectures for the 55th International Congress of Medieval Studies were to have been Sharon Kinoshita's "Marco Polo and the Diversity of the Global Middle Ages" and Wendy Laura Belcher's "The Black Queen of Sheba: A Global History of an African Idea" (55th ICMS Program, xxiv).

[23] In addition to *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World Through Illuminated Manuscripts* (cited above), recent examples include Erik Hermans, ed., *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages* (York: Arc Humanities Press, 2020); Albert Classen, ed., *Paradigm Shifts During the Global Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2019); and Regula Forster and Neguin Yavari, eds., *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered* (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2015).

[24] In 2019, Dr. Mark Williams was appointed Associate Professor of Global Medieval Literature at St. Edmund Hall, University of Oxford ("Professor Mark Williams," https://www.seh.ox.ac.uk/people/mark-williams). In the fall of the same year, Rowan University and the State University of New York at Geneseo both posted job searches for an Assistant Professor of Global Medieval Literatures.

[25] E.g., Georgetown University offers interdisciplinary undergraduate majors and minors in Global Medieval Studies ("Medieval Studies Program," https://medievalstudies.georgetown.edu/); the University of Pennsylvania offers an undergraduate minor in Global Medieval Studies and a Graduate Certificate in Global Medieval & Renaissance Studies ("Global Medieval & Renaissance Studies," https://web.sas.upenn.edu/global-medieval-studies/.)

[26] Or, alternately, centuries; scholars of India often refer to the medieval period as extending up until the widescale colonial regimes of the eighteenth century (Keene, "Introduction," 22). But this was not a sudden process, and its roots can be traced to the era described here; Goa fell under Portuguese control in 1510.

[27] The printing press and the Reformation, to cite two other great boundary markers of the Early Modern, were undoubtedly of great importance for Western Europe. The emergence of the printing press particularly, as many have asserted, is strongly linked to both the success of the Reformation and to the contemporary European voyages of conquest and colonization. But printing was already widespread in parts of East Asia, and would not catch on in the Islamic world for centuries; the Reformation was even more parochial in its effects, and emphases on its influence have a worrying tendency to shade into culturally supremacist fetishism of a "Protestant work ethic." To indulge in gross metonymy: for the periodization of a global, if not necessarily a European, Middle Ages, Columbus probably outweighs Gutenberg and Luther.

spoke to the food they ate to the diseases from which they died. Naturally, these changes did not all occur everywhere at once. They disseminated gradually and unevenly, affected different people differently, and one could convincingly argue that certain regions (perhaps especially Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands) were exempt from any noticeable shift for long enough that 1492 does not mark for them the significant break that it does for the Americas, Africa, and Eurasia. But the British colonial ventures that began in Oceania some three centuries later were themselves not unrelated to the events that had ended the medieval world elsewhere.

If this end-point of the medieval seems, to me, relatively clear, it is significantly harder to define a beginning. The old Eurocentric date of 476 CE, when Odoacer deposed the Western Roman emperor Romulus Augustus, is not only hopelessly parochial but of dubious political or cultural significance even locally. In the Iranian context, the Islamic conquest—for which either the Battle of al-Qādisiyya in 636 CE or the ignominious death of the last Sāsāniān Shāhānshāh, Yazdegerd III, in 651 CE, offer symbolic dates—represents a much more momentous shift for a much larger geographical region, but Europeans barely seem to have taken note even of the Muslim capture of Jerusalem, in the year after al-Qādisiyya. Other moments could be adduced for other cultures and localities, ranging through the middle centuries of the first millennium CE: the collapse of the Gupta Empire in India in the 6th century, the decline of Teotihuacán in Mexico shortly thereafter, the rise of the Sui (581 CE) and then the Tang dynasties (618 CE) in China. As the latter example indicates, however, these moments need not be "falls" or catastrophes; indeed, it is analytically more useful, and often truer to medieval sources themselves, to see them as re-formations, emergences, and foundations. This is true, as Chapter I will suggest, even for groups like the Welsh who emphatically remembered the events of the

fifth through seventh centuries as a catastrophe of defeat and dispossession—yet nonetheless rooted their origins as a people in that very catastrophe.

It thus seems preferable to conceptualize the beginning of the medieval period as a horizon upon which various communities retroactively located moments of significant transition or becoming. Often, this siting did not occur until much later. The ninth and tenth centuries particularly emerge as an era—at least in Europe and the Islamic world—when the events of earlier upheavals began to assume clear narrative form in a range of historical, prophetic, and literary texts. Thus a global Middle Ages can be conceptualized not only in terms of concrete linkages, but also as a set of identity-constructing projects occurring in parallel among disparate groups. In each of these, an imaginative engagement with the past proved key to sociocultural formations of what would come to be the medieval.

This definition is thus meant to be open and elective rather than restrictive and proscriptive. And, crucially for the current study, it centers narrative, and specifically narratives about the past, as the key site through which the medieval emerges.

Global Medieval Literature

The above analysis suggests that any conception of a Middle Ages must acknowledge global perspectives, and that this view is becoming increasingly common within medieval studies. People of the pre-Columbian millennium inhabited a deeply interconnected world. They traveled widely, and their objects went with them. But literature is not a commodity or a souvenir. Someone, whether an enterprising Norse person or far-ranging Buddhist, brought an Indian figurine of the Buddha to the Swedish village of Helgö;[28] but this enterprising traveler did

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[28] Bo Gyllensvärd, "The Buddha found at Helgö," in *Excavations at Helgö XVI: exotic and sacral finds from Helgö*, ed. Helen Clarke and Kristina Lamm (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2004), 11-28.

not, it seems, bring a copy of the *Dhammapada*. Literature is rooted deep in culture. Its transference—that is to say, literary translation—has always been an immensely resource-intensive task, requiring not only well-trained specialists but interested patrons and receptive audiences. Surviving medieval translators' handbooks, such as the *Codex Cumanicus* (interfacing an Italic Romance dialect, vernacular Persian, and Kipchak Turkic)[29] and the *Rasulid Hexaglot* (the six languages of the title being Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Greek, Armenian and Mongol)[30] are fascinating documents. But they are far better suited for the oral communication of mercantile or diplomatic information than they are for relaying one culture's stories in another's idiom; certainly no evidence suggests that they were used in the latter manner.

And yet a vast volume of text undoubtedly did flow throughout the eastern hemisphere during the Middle Ages, overcoming linguistic, cultural, and confessional boundaries. Tracts of religious, scientific, and philosophical content (with these spheres often blending indistinguishably into one another), such as the renowned works of the Persian ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, in Latin translation)[31] and the Andalusian ibn Rushd (Averroes),[32] circulated widely in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Wisdom literature and folktales, often going hand-in-hand in collections such as the *Sendbādnāmeh* (*The Seven Wise Masters* or *Seven Sages of Rome*, in the European tradition)[33] and the animal fables of *Kalīla wa Dimna* (the Sanskrit

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[29] David Neil MacKenzie, "Codex Cumanicus," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* V/8 (2011): 885-886, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/codex-cumanicus.
[30] Peter B. Golden, "Rasulid Hexaglot," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition (2009), http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/rasulid-hexaglot.
[31] See Dimitri Gutas, "Ibn Sina [Avicenna]," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/ibn-sina/, for a short summary of ibn Sina's life and work. For more extended recent discussions of his reception, see D. N. Hasse and A. Bertolacci, eds., *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics* [Scientia Graeco-Arabica 7] (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).
[32] Paul J. J. M. Bakker, ed., *Averroes' Natural Philosophy and its Reception in the Latin West* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015).
[33] A thorough overview of this textual complex is Hans R. Runte's "Portal, Society of the Seven Sages." http://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/49107/Hans_Runte_Seven_Sages.pdf?sequence=3/

Panchatantra)[34] likewise enjoyed extraordinary cosmopolitan distributions. Even when clear

transmission histories are lacking, thick correspondences of motif and narrative amongst certain

fabliaux and their Islamicate analogues suggest, in Franklin Lewis's words, "that the seeds of

this genre were scattered across the Mediterranean with the increased interchange and

international exchange provoked by the Crusades."[35] And as it turns out, there is a textual

counterpart to the Helgö statuette: as early as 1446, Europeans began to realize that their

hagiographical *Barlaam and Josaphat* was identical to the story of the Buddha, which had

become Christianized in a Syriac retelling, and eventually spread as far west as Iceland.[36]

     All three of these latter examples possess a common trajectory. They are works that

originated in India and spread to the Iranian world by the end of the pre-Islamic era. From there,

they were translated or adapted into Arabic, Syriac, and/or Greek, before entering Latinate

Europe either through the Balkans or Iberia. It is tempting—particularly for scholars of Asian

cultures, eager to push back against entrenched Eurocentrism—to see in this history a general

pattern by which literary innovation begins in the East and is gradually carried westward.

     The danger with this model is that it tends to produce hierarchies: either the East is the

truly creative origin site of stories, genres, and tropes which the West can only imitate; or, in an

echo of the medieval notion of *translatio imperii*, the West is positioned as the refiner and

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[34] See, e.g., Luis M. Girón-Negrón, "How the Go-Between Cut Her Nose: Two Ibero-Medieval Translations of a *Kalilah wa Dimnah* Story," in *Under the Influence: Questioning the Comparative in Medieval Castile*, ed. Cynthia Robinson and Leyla Rouhi (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 231-260.

[35] Franklin Lewis, "One Chaste Muslim Maiden and a Persian in a Pear Tree: Analogues of Boccaccio and Chaucer in Four Earlier Arabic and Persian Tales," in *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, ed. Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 182.

[36] An Old French version of the tale has recently been published: Gui de Cambrai, *Barlaam and Josaphat: A Christian Tale of the Buddha*, intro. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., trans. and notes Peggy Mccracken (New York: Penguin Books, 2014). A fairly popular example of globe-trotting medieval literature, the case of *Barlaam and Josaphat* is discussed by, e.g., Heng, "Global Middle Ages," 425-427; and Bryan C. Keene, "Prologue," in *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World Through Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. Bryan C. Keene (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019), 1-3.

perfecter of the East's decadent output. And even as globalized visions of the Middle Ages incorporate regions such as the Americas, global medieval literatures conceived on the lines of the *Seven Sages* or *Barlaam and Josaphat* must by necessity be limited to Africa and Eurasia. Most importantly for this dissertation, the model of transmission from East to West struggles to account for a significant subset of medieval literature: fantastical narratives set in a notionally historical past. While accounts of long-gone heroes were popular throughout and beyond the Eurasian expanse, specific tales of this type—with the noteworthy exception of the Alexander Cycle[37]—remained confined to particular cultural spheres. Stories of Arthur appeared in virtually every European language, including Hebrew,[38] but are entirely absent from Islamicate languages until the modern period. In turn, the Iranian epic cycle epitomized by the *Shāhnāmeh* was known across South Asia and the Middle East, and carried well into Europe by the Ottomans. Yet it only seems to have been noticed in Christian Europe in the seventeenth century, and did not enter popular awareness to any great extent until the nineteenth.[39]

Despite these disjunctures, shared features of such narratives have led generations of scholars to seek connections between works such as *Tristan et Iseult* and *Vis o Rāmin*, a trend discussed in more detail below. More productive than hunting for elusive lines of influence, I propose, is acknowledging the social conditions, intellectual atmospheres, and historical

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[37] Alexander the Great's unique status as a hero for medieval European, Asian, and African audiences lies in the fertile confluence of authoritative and popular accounts of his career in the multilingual Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity. Latin historians such as Quintus Curtius Rufus, Greek romances attributed to "Pseudo-Callisthenes," the Qur'ānic figure of Dhū-l-Qarnayn, Hebrew Talmudic and Mishnaic traditions, and Persian narratives that associated the Macedonian conquest with the loss of prestige and the dispersal of sacred scripture, all contributed to Alexander's cosmopolitan fame. Recent discussions of the medieval Alexander tradition include, e.g., Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); and David Zuwiyya, ed., *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). The Persian account of Alexander (Eskandar) from Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh* is discussed in Chapter II of this dissertation (pages 268-273).
[38] Curt Leviant, ed. and trans., *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).
[39] Franklin Lewis, "The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi as World Literature," *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 319-320.

imaginaries that combined to produce speculative accounts of the past in a wide range of medieval cultures. Geraldine Heng frames a definition of what she terms "romance" broad enough to apply across a huge number of literary traditions—"a mode of narration in which history and fantasy jostle together and collide, vanishing each into the other, without apology or explanation, at precisely the junctures where both could be mined to best advantage."[40]

Imagined in these terms, a "global medieval literature" might be one which draws upon my definition of the Middle Ages in terms of culturally specific projects of identity construction, provided above. Positing such a literature acknowledges the rich interconnections of the medieval era and the fruitfulness of identifying parallels (as well as contrasts) without relying on chains of transmission or lost transitional texts. It suggests that a common interest in imagining the past unites disparate cultures not as an invention produced in one place and disseminated to others, but as a speculative coming-into-being by which groups across the medieval world strived to understand their place within its globalized networks.

Medieval Fictionality

Geraldine Heng's definition for romance describes the force that mates with history to produce this quintessentially medieval literature as "fantasy." This is a usefully elusive term, eliding as it does several distinct concepts: an unrestrained product of the imagination ("a flight of fantasy"); an eroticized desire hovering between conception and fulfillment; and a particular genre of modern fiction which often invokes a pseudo-medieval world that resembles, at least superficially, the setting of many genuinely medieval romances. While few would deny that the

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[40] Heng, "Global Middle Ages," 420, echoing an earlier definition in Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 2. Compare Heng's listing of 'Antara's heroic qualities in terms calculated to highlight their similarities to Western European romance (Heng, "Global Middle Ages," 417).

first type of fantasy was present across the medieval globe, and the second—once a certain post-Kinseyan and post-Freudian self-awareness is subtracted—is likewise probably at least as old as consciousness, the third is more problematic. Modern fantasy depends on a nostalgic detachment from the lost world it depicts *and* a thorough awareness that this world never, in fact, existed. Medieval audiences, one might imagine, were fully immersed in their own era, and so could not dream wistfully of long-lost castles and jousting knights; while their naivety, their ignorance of anachronism, and their gullibility towards the miraculous meant that they could never comprehend the detachment required to appreciate fantasy fiction qua fiction. Yet like most presumptions of cultural unsophistication, these premises rest on shaky ground, and the matters of medieval fiction—even medieval fantasy fiction—are not so easily dismissed.

It is not my intention here to relitigate fully the question of medieval fictionality, a massively complex topic that would warrant (and indeed, has warranted) book-length treatments of its own. I propose only to lay out a few positions that other scholars have taken the subject, linking these also to theories of the medieval "marvelous" and "supernatural," before suggesting how my own approach—based in the notion of the speculative—both chimes with and diverges from these accounts.

Fritz Peter Knapp traces the modern wars over the concept of medieval fiction to Walter Haug's 1985 *Literaturtheorie im deutschen Mittelalter von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des13. Jahrhunderts*, which attributes the "discovery of fiction" to the late 12th century French romancer, Chrétien de Troyes.[41] D. H. Green traced the roots of this discourse even further back into Latin texts of the early 11th century, and offered a definition rooted in a mutual recognition of purpose between writer and audience:

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[41] Walter Haug, *Literaturtheorie im deutschen Mittelalter von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des13. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992), 105.

> Fiction is a category of literary text which, although it may also include events that were held to have actually taken place, gives an account of events that could not conceivably have taken place and /or of events that, although possible, did not take place, and which, in doing so, invites the intended audience to be willing to make-believe what would otherwise be regarded as untrue.[42]

Green's formulation is based around an imagined history interpenetrated with impossible or potential events, and so points productively to the relationship of this literature with speculative pasts. Yet it also seems to echo Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief," and in doing so invites charges of subjectivity and anachronism. How might we know what medieval audiences were, or weren't willing to do? They are only legible in negative, invoked rhetorically or implicitly by authors who are rarely explicit about their works' intent.

As Knapp points out, medieval ontologies based on Augustinian models fundamentally denied the possibility of mortals creating anything *ex nihilo*. Creative power proper belonged only to God; humans, in turn could "only shape anew what has already been created." Authors could craft or adapt, but they could not conjure alternate worlds. "In the Christian-Aristotelian sense, there is only *one* reality. Man can neither reproduce it or supplant it."[43] Knapp likewise ascribes a special status to Chrétien's oeuvre, which adopts "unequivocal signals of indifference in regard to truth" from "the wondrous realm of the fairy-tale," thus allowing its "unfettering from the truth of real being." But "[t]his fictionality… remains a very rare special case within romance production, which was otherwise dominated by pseudo-history. It thus fails as the beginning of a solid tradition of this kind in the Middle Ages."[44]

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[42] D. H. Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150-1220* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

[43] Fritz Peter Knapp, "Historicity and Fictionality in Medieval Narrative," in *True Lies Worldwide: Fictionality in Global Contexts,* ed. Anders Cullhed and Lena Rydholm (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 180.

[44] Knapp, "Historicity," 185.

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The precise difference between "pseudo-history" and fiction proper, however, proves slippery. Moreover, Knapp's invocation of "the fairy-tale" creates its own problems. Associated with a particular literary genre of the early modern period and, later, the folktales collected by nineteenth-century proto-ethnographers like the Brothers Grimm, the exact nature—even the independent existence, apart from learned retellings and reformulations—of medieval "fairy-tales" is virtually impossible to verify.

Wim Verbaal avoids this difficulty by proposing instead an "auto-referential" definition of fiction. Verbaal locates a shift occurring in the centuries between 1000 and 1200 CE, from literature always referring to "an external reference point, ultimately the reader, whose instruction they aim at," towards what "can be considered to be sheer leisure reading, merely wanting to please the reader."[45] According to this view, whereas "the instructive texts want to allot the reader his proper place in his actual and factual world," "the romance wants to carry the reader away into its own fictional world." Carried off by a magical narrative, the reader here is analogized to the knights of the "Breton *lais*" discussed in Chapter III of this project, borne off into wondrous otherworlds.[46] Yet Verbaal, confusingly, seems to identify the text both as the agent and as the site of this seduction: "The text becomes a world of its own, no longer necessarily connected to its historical, contextual reality."[47] This mixed metaphor leads to some confusion. Is the text an active force which seeks out its audience and pulls them into a fictive elsewhere? Or is it itself that elsewhere, enchanting but passive territory awaiting exploration? Verbaal's ascription of a shift towards the fictional to a particular time (and, implicitly, a

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[45] Wim Verbaal, "How the West was Won by Fiction: The Appearance of Fictional Narrative and Leisurely Reading in Western Literature (11th and 12th century)" in *True Lies Worldwide: Fictionality in Global Contexts,* ed. Anders Cullhed and Lena Rydholm (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 193.

[46] See Chapter III, Part II. Lover Occulted: *Lanval, Graelent*, and *Guingamor*.

[47] Verbaal, "How the West," 194

particular place—Western Europe) also invites the mustering of counterexamples, from earlier eras and distant places, which are equally uninterested in "instruction."

In these problematic accounts, capable scholars offer interesting observations while demonstrating overall the extreme difficulty of tackling premodern fictionality and positioning it within the medieval era. The situation is not much better for those interested in non-Western cultures. Bo Utas points out that even in the modern language, there is no native Persian term for fiction; rather, "[a] number of circumstances led to an integrated mixture of fact and fantasy in the literary experience of the Iranians, which means that it is generally quite difficult to sort out fictional and imaginary elements in their texts." This challenge manifests in Utas's conflicting assertions, many based in speculation about the mental states of long-dead audiences. Arabian Nights-type tales, he claims, "were hardly thought of as being fictive stories but rather as tales of adventures and events that really had taken place somewhere and sometime."[48] Contrary to this assertion of gullibility, however, medieval Islamicate readers took strong positions on the truth value of marvelous creatures and events, as discussed in Chapter II below.[49] Much as Western scholars gravitate towards the masterpieces of Chrétien de Troyes in their search for a birth of fictionality, Utas turns towards Chrétien's contemporary, Nezāmi Ganjavi. Nezāmi, Utas writes,

> was obviously quite aware that his epics were his own invention and that he was creating a fictive world that had a life of its own. On the other hand, he knew that he had inserted his creation into a strong narrative and poetic tradition from which he took motifs, topoi and much of his plots. He both embellished the old stories and created them anew.[50]

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[48] Bo Utas, "Classical Persian Literature: Fiction, Didactics or Intuitive Truth?" in *True Lies Worldwide: Fictionality in Global Contexts,* ed. Anders Cullhed and Lena Rydholm (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 167.
[49] See pages 195 and 228-229.
[50] Utas, "Classical Persian," 171.

Utas admits that "[t]hese verse narratives put my thesis of the generally non-fictive character of the Persian literary experience to the test." This awareness, furthermore, was not confined to the author; apparently unlike the credulous populace who believed in the marvels of folktales, Nezāmi's audience were a savvier bunch. The poet's works "construct[ed] worlds outside of normal reality, and must have been experienced in that way by most readers at the time of their composition as well as in the following centuries." And yet, he persists, "it is still my impression that no real distinction between fictive and factual narratives was made."[51] In conclusion, Utas doubts that premodern Persian writers

> …consciously intended to invent imaginary worlds. They rather took over traditional forms, genres, motifs, stories and metaphors, striving to embellish them, develop them and drive them towards perfection. Furthermore, those works were conceived and received in a culture that was steeped in a world-view of a Neo-Platonic type, according to which the world that we perceive with our senses only mirrors the truly existing world of ideas.[52]

By invoking cultural reading practices of nonliteral interpretation based in the *'ālam al-mithāl*, "the world of likenesses," Utas makes a welcome move of contextualization. Yet it remains unclear how he proposes to differentiate Nezāmi's "creating a fictive world that had a life of its own" from a "conscious[…] inten[t] to invent imaginary worlds"; or what it means to "drive" an array of cultural narrative forms "towards perfection." Nor was the Persian world unique in its embrace of Neo-Platonism, which remained a crucial component of European thought, albeit on somewhat different terms from its Islamicate counterpart.

Ultimately unsatisfying attempts to delineate medieval fictionality lend ammunition to scholars seeking to claim fiction as an exclusive property of modernity, whose archive possesses

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[51] Utas, "Classical Persian," 171.
[52] Utas, "Classical Persian," 176.

admittedly clearer signs of a shift in discourse around truth and literature. Against approaches

like Verbaal's that equate fictionality with imaginative realms, Catherine Gallagher marks off the

"manifestly improbable" category of "fantasy" as incommensurate with "fictional

sophistication," which she links to the rise of the socially realistic novel in the late eighteenth

century.[53]

But as Julie Orlemanski points out in her critique of Gallagher's claims, arguments like

these are rooted in the "ideologies of secularism and disenchantment, those widespread

narratives of historical difference that recount modernity's emergence from a credulous past."[54]

These grand narratives, epitomized by the work of Max Weber, validate whatever losses have

occurred along the way—"traditional forms of community," "supernatural agency"—as

necessary for the production of a present that represents "a truer and more sophisticated relation

to the world."[55] But even those who posit an earlier fictionality (such as a medieval, or ancient

Greek one) often do so in terms that reiterate the secularization narrative but simply assign it an

earlier starting point.[56]

Orlemanski's own position is to see fictionality "as historically contingent but irreducible

to the referential conventions popularized by the realist novel." She argues for a "*hermeneutic*

conception of fictionality," which positions fiction's occurrence "at the interface between

language's fundamental capacity to portray the nonactual and the various regularizations of that

capacity in literary genres, rhetorical commonplaces, and habituated social functions." This

interplay between verbal expression and sociocultural practice, I would add, validates a blended

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[53] Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel, Volume 1*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 338-339.
[54] Julie Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality, and the Middle Ages," *New Literary History* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 146.
[55] Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction," 150.
[56] Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction," 152.

mode of interpretation that combines close attention to text and language with an awareness of wider contextual frames. Indeed, such an approach is necessary even to identify Orlemanski's fictionality, which "depends on the recognition by some interpretive community of a representation's distinction from one or another idiom of actuality—from history, philosophy, factuality, religious doctrine, a sacrament's performative efficacy, or everyday speech."[57]

Orlemanski's hermeneutic fictionality does not exclude other modes of discourse from operating alongside or even within it. Indeed, in many texts, it is present through a "referential dappling," an intermingling of intentionally fictional and nonfictional elements.[58] For the texts explored in this project, the key axis of nonfictionality is history—the term that combines with fantasy to produce romance, in Heng's definition. In this context, history operates both synchronically (medieval writers drew on available accounts of the past to compose narratives about it) and diachronically (modern scholars can explore ways in which historical events were taken up narratively; or, more dubiously, search for tenuous historical correlates to fictional medieval characters, places, and events).[59]

The relation of history, both political and social, to medieval imaginative literatures has also seen important developments since the end of the twentieth century. Gabrielle Spiegel's answers to the challenge of semiotics and deconstructionism, advanced theoretically in "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,"[60] then practically and at length in *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-*

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[57] Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction," 146-147.
[58] Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction," 161-162.
[59] E.g., the industry devoted to the search for the "real King Arthur"; or Saghi Gazerani's *The Sistani Cycle of Epics and Iran's National History: On the Margins of Historiography*, which advances, among other euhemerist claims, a connection between Garshāsp's combat with a dragon in the *Garshāspnāmeh* and the dragon banner that Greek and Latin historians ascribed to the Suren clan (Saghi Gazerani, *The Sistani Cycle of Epics and Iran's National History: On the Margins of Historiography* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2016), 56).
[60] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65, no. 1 (Jan., 1990): 59-86.

Century France[61] remain seminal in their recognition of the "dissolution of history" wrought by theorists like Saussure and Derrida.[62] However, the fine-grained approach to networks of textual production that she advocates as a way to recuperate historical meaning within premodern literature is simply not possible in many contexts (including most of those considered in this project), and the question of whether a similar degree of responsibility can be achieved with a poorer material and historiographical record remains open.

However, a poststructuralist position on historical truth may be less an alien interloper in the medieval context than an embrace of the culturally contextualized reading practices advocated by Utas and Orlemanski. As Monika Otter writes, "Despite its modern or even postmodern flavor, the notion that narrative history is a verbal construct, a textual artefact with its own poetics rather than a direct, uncomplicated reflection of events, would have come as no surprise to medieval writers and readers."[63] In Otter's account, the gap between "ultimately irretrievable" past events and their later narration opens a "fictional space" of which the medieval world was often fully aware, and which authors exploited both subtly and, in cases like Geoffrey of Monmouth's, with blatant exuberance.[64] Yet crucially, these fictions do not devalue the accounts of the past that they communicate; on the contrary, such texts could, and in some cases still do, provide "ideological legitimization, collective identity, continuity and prestige."[65]

Truth and fiction, in other words, were not understood as competing and mutually exclusive values but as a spectrum of discursive strategies animating any given text, with astute audiences moving deftly amongst them. These practices are richly displayed in works like the

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[61] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).
[62] Spiegel, "History," 63.
[63] Monika Otter, "Functions of Fiction in Historical Writing," in *Writing Medieval History,* ed. Nancy Partner (London: Hodder and Arnold, 2005), 109.
[64] Otter, "Functions," 118-121.
[65] Otter, "Functions," 122.

anonymous *Ovide Moralisé* (late 13th or early 14th century CE), which intersperses a poetic translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with versified commentaries providing a non-hierarchical array of *sens*—meanings or significations—by which each myth might be understood. In addition to the poetic pleasure and erudition provided by the elegantly translated text itself, the reader is invited to reflect on the tales as euhemerized reflections of historical truths (with, for instance, the classical gods understood as powerful rulers and magicians later deified by their people), allegories of Old and/or New Testament events, and commentaries on contemporary politics, as well as abstracted moral and allegorical exempla.[66] The *Ovide Moralisé* thus offers an anatomy of the complex and multitudinous ways in which medieval European audiences understood fantastical tales. While their methodology is quite different, Shehāboddin Yahyā Sohravardi's mystical commentaries on Iranian epic, such as *'Aql-e Sorkh* ("The Crimson Intellect," late twelfth century CE),[67] likewise suggest multifarious practices of reading and interpreting legendary narratives of the past.

Furthermore, as Joseph Falaky Nagy points out, the plots of medieval texts often employ metacommentary on the very processes by which ancient knowledge is sought out, recovered, and reworked into fictive narrative:

> Especially in narratives having to do with a heroic search for the unknown or the otherworldly, often a search is simultaneously launched for knowledge and its fabled possessor, a figure located in legendary space and time. When these prove elusive, the text calls its ability to locate and handle such knowledge into question; when the

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[66] Cornelis de Boer, ed., *Ovide Moralisé: Poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle* (2 vols.) (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1915).

[67] Shehāboddin Yahyā Sohravardi, *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques II. Oeuvres en persan (Opera metaphysica et mystica III)*, ed. and intro. S. H. Naṣr; prolegomena, analysis, and comm. Henry Corbin (Tehrān: Bibliothèque Iranienne 7, 1970).

knowledge and its possessor are found, they usually prove to be too much for the text to process or contain properly, by the text's own admission.[68]

Highlighting the metafictional possibilities of "the unknown or the otherworldly," Nagy offers a rebuke to assertions, like Catherine Gallagher's, of the incompatibility between "fantasy" and "fictional sophistication." Yet the medieval parameters of blatant non-realism—particularly, the relation of magic, mythical beasts, parahumans, the warping of time, and related tropes to cultural patterns of belief and credulity—raise difficult questions of interpretation and terminology. Seemingly any word chosen to describe and group these motifs together risks invoking unwanted associations and charges of anachronism: "marvelous," "fantastic," "supernatural," "uncanny," and so on. To some extent, I find the attempt to strictly delineate these terms not particularly helpful; taken in their expansive modern meanings, each is apt for a variety of medieval narrative situations, and I employ them as such throughout the body of this dissertation. In the following sections, however, I lay out some of the approaches medievalists and others have taken to developing this critical vocabulary with reference to both descriptive terminology and modern genres, before offering my own proposal of the "speculative."

The Marvelous, the Supernatural, and the Uncanny

One of the more developed frameworks for addressing the unrealistic occurrences that punctuate medieval texts is "le merveilleux." As a critical term, this dates back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century,[69] with the modern discourse around the term established in

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[68] Joseph Falaky Nagy, "A Leash and an *Englyn* in the Medieval Welsh Arthurian Tale *Culhwch ac Olwen*," in *New Directions in Oral Theory*, ed. Mark C. Amodio (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 238.

[69] Edmond Faral, "Le Merveilleux et ses sources dans les descriptions des romans français du XIIᵉ siècle," in *Recherches sur les sources latines des contes et romans courtois du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1913), 307-388.

the early nineteen eighties by scholars like Claude Lecouteux[70] and Daniel Poirion.[71] As Jacques

le Goff points out, medieval scholars (*clercs*) themselves had a word, *mirabilis*, etymologically

connected and corresponding to some degree with "le merveilleux"; but for them this was "une

collection," for us, "une catégorie."[72] Le Goff positions an ideologically neutral, originally pre-

Christian *mirabilis* rooted in legend and folk tradition in opposition to a diabolical *magicus* and a

firmly Christian *miraculosus*.[73] These latter have singular causes; the *mirabilis*, by contrast is

produced by "une multiplicité de forces."[74] This heterogeneity, by refusing both satanic and

divine alignment, produces "une forme de résistance à l'idéologie officielle du christianisme."[75]

At the same time, it is readily deployed by other ideological systems, such as the idealized

individualism of aristocratic chivalry[76] or the genealogical claims of rival dynasties.[77] Le Goff's

ascription of *mirabilis* to pre-Christian sensibilities is dubious, as it posits a lengthy and

unattested survival of pagan knowledge into the high Middle Ages. But resistance to an ideology

does not need to predate it, and the semblance of antiquity may be a powerful tool regardless of

its accuracy.

　　As Le Goff notes, and etymology suggests, the "merveilleux" is predominantly a visual

phenomenon. As such, it may struggle to incorporate motifs such as weirded time (the subject of

Chapter I) or even the parahumans of Chapter II, who—with a few notable exceptions, such as

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[70] Claude Lecouteux, "Introduction à l'étude du merveilleux médiévale," *Études germaniques* 36 (1981): 273-290.
[71] Daniel Poirion, *Le Merveilleux dans la littérature française du moyen âge* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982).
[72] Jacques le Goff, "Le merveilleux dans l'Occident médiéval," in *L'Imaginaire Médiéval: Essais* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1985), 18.
[73] Le Goff, "Le merveilleux," 29.
[74] Le Goff, "Le merveilleux," 22.
[75] Le Goff, "Le merveilleux," 24.
[76] Le Goff, "Le merveilleux," 21.
[77] Le Goff, "Le merveilleux," 26. The specific examples Le Goff cites, of Mélusine and of the Plantagenet's alleged demonic ancestry, are discussed below in Chapter III (pages 398-400).

Muldumarec's transformation from goshawk to man[78]—do not appear different from unmarked humans. Yet in Francis Dubost's formulation, the effects of the "merveilleux" ripple out from the break it tears in the text's realist façade, causing a dramatic ontological shift:

> Le motif merveilleux fait violence aux codes de l'écriture réaliste, ou bien se situe aux limites des références cautionnées par le savoir de l'époque, comme le motif de l'homme-loup. C'est dire qu'au moment même où le merveilleux s'exprime, il s'accompagne non seulement d'un changement de système référential, mais aussi d'un changement de chronologie.[79]

The chronological transformation that Dubost perceives in the aftermath of the marvelous occurrence inflects many of the narratives explored in this project. The marvel's ability to alter temporalities is at least partially due to its association with the past, a relationship that my subsequent chapters seek to interrogate in depth. This is not to imply that medieval writers relegated weirded time, predatory monsters, and parahuman beings exclusively to the past. Still, the association of these motifs with lost eras instills them with a sense of decline, a fundamentally tragic mode. This tragedy, furthermore, is a key mechanism in suspending imaginations of the past between hegemonic and anti-hegemonic discourses, as discussed below.

Dubost also invokes the "surnaturel," a term he understands "dans sa plus grande extensión, et nous retiendrons sous cette designation tous les éléments qui transgressent, ou paraissent transgresser, aussi bien l'ordre de la Création et l'*ordo naturae* qui en procède, que les données de l'expérience commune, sans nous interroger pour l'instant sur leur origine."[80] Here, as in his definition of the "merveilleux," there is a sense of trespass. The flat surface of the text

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[78] See pages 428-433.
[79] Francis Dubost, "Les Motifs Merveilleux Dans les Lais de Marie de France," in *Amour et Merveilles: Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995), 46.
[80] Dubost, "Motifs," 44.

reflects quotidian experience, unless and until it is shattered by an intrusion that is fundamentally unreconcilable with existing modes of discourse or systems of belief. This echoes Le Goff's positioning of the "merveilleux" against official doctrine. It also suggests a destabilizing of ontology, a failure of existing categories that provokes something akin to the uncanny.

The uncanny is not a mode often associated with medieval texts—perhaps because, in the Freudian sense of the *unheimlich,* there needs to be an essential familiarity for the eerily intimate disassociations of the uncanny to take place. Whatever familiarity the modern reader does have with the medieval is overlaid with a thick coating of antiquarian nostalgia and/or schadenfreude, which converts many of the strange beings and occurrences of medieval literature into fantasy. (This, in fact, may be one definition of fantasy as a genre—once-uncanny motifs transmuted by nostalgia or disavowal into something more wistful and less unsettling.) Yet as Dubost's descriptions of referential failure in the "merveilleux" and "surnaturel" suggest, the absence of the medieval uncanny may be more a problem of interpretation than one of sources.

Modern Genres, Medieval Texts

Another way to account for defiantly unreal aspects of medieval literature is to invoke modern genre terminology. Fantasy is a popular choice, as mentioned above; the word's broad semantic range allows it to outflank anachronism to some degree. While Le Goff opposes any idea of the medieval "fantastique," seeing this as "romantique et surréaliste" and so alien to premodern sensibilities,[81] other scholars are not so exacting. The *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, for instance, begins its chronology of the genre with *Beowulf*.[82]

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[81] Le Goff, "Le merveilleux," 21.
[82] Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xv.

More controversially, imaginative medieval accounts of the past might be considered "alternate histories"—self-conscious interventions in historical narrative that subvert audience expectations of the past as a closed book. This is, to some extent, the approach taken by Monika Otter when she describes Geoffrey of Monmouth's "creative history-making."[83] Certainly, medieval narratives that injected the past with marvelous, supernatural, or uncanny elements were often subsequent to more sober histories, expanding and even altering the accounts presented by these sources. Yet it was the later, stranger versions that often were, and continue to be, employed for a range of ideological aims. In the historical context of their production, their fictively having-happened produced a range of artifacts vital to present concern, from genealogies (Welsh, Persian, and French magnates all regularly claimed descent from the characters of their fictionalized histories)[84] to physical objects (Richard I was said to have gifted Excalibur to Tancred of Sicily in 1191)[85] to geographies (Nāser Khosrow saw a mountain pass that Bahrām Gur had cut with his sword.)[86] Perhaps most importantly, the antiquity and persuasiveness of these accounts have granted them a firm position in the imaginary of their respective cultures. Arthur and Rostam, to take two important figures for this study, likely never existed. Yet it is impossible to imagine medieval Welsh or French literature without the former, or Persian literature without the latter.

Even more provocative than fantasy or alternative history, perhaps, is the notion of a medieval science fiction. As Carl Kears and James Paz point out, histories of science fiction tend

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[83] Otter, "Functions," 121.

[84] See, for instance, Marjolijn van Zutphen, *Farāmarz, the Sistāni Hero: Texts and Traditions of the Farāmarznāme and the Persian Epic Cycle* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 144, on the adoption of heroic genealogies by the Sistāni Mehrabānid dynasty; and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 89, for a discussion of how genealogy and relics were used to reify the fictional character, Guy of Warwick.

[85] M. I. Finley, Denis Mack Smith and Christopher Duggan, *A History of Sicily* (New York: Viking, 1987), 65.

[86] Abu Mo'in Hamidoddin Nāser ebn-e Khosrow al-Qubādiāni, *Nasir- i Khusraw's Book of Travels* [*Safarnāmeh*], ed. and trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2013), 125.

to begin in the early modern period (Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516 being a popular starting point). A few may go back to works like Lucian of Samosata's *A True History*, of the 2nd century CE; but nearly all skip the Middle Ages, given that period's reputation as an era of stagnation and ignorance.[87] Yet as Kears and Paz's edited volume, *Medieval Science Fiction*, suggests, there are in fact abundant aspirants to the eponymous label. The essays they collect are centrally concerned with fictions drawing on or extrapolating from contemporary scientific knowledge, producing a somewhat different archive from the texts explored here. But from the cosmological imaginings of *Culhwch ac Olwen* to a medical taxonomy of snake venom in the *Garshāspnāmeh*, medieval science regularly inflects many of the works discussed below.

As a warrant for their endeavor, Kears and Paz note the congruence of many medieval works with Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment."[88] Suvin has been famously contemptuous of fantasy for lacking this concern with knowledge and rational inquiry. As Kears and Paz point out, however, topoi like the "Wonders of the East" (mirrored in the Indian Ocean *'ajā'ib* of Islamicate tradition) invite an imaginative realization of *scientia* in ways that "resonate" with Suvin's requirements. They cite the vicious *nicra,* Indian water beasts that prey upon Alexander's armies in the Old English recension of the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*.[89] However sensationalized, these monsters nonetheless represent informed speculation about exotic lifeforms. R. M. Liuzza's essay in the collection

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[87] Carl Kears and James Paz, "Introduction. Medieval Science Fiction: An Impossible Fantasy?" in *Medieval Science Fiction*, ed. Carl Kears and James Paz (London: King's College London, Center for Late Antique & Medieval Studies, 2016), 4-6.

[88] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 7-8.

[89] Kears and Paz, "Introduction," 9-10.

treats the Old English version of the Seven Sleepers legend as a form of time-travel narrative,[90] while Mary Baine Campbell's contribution approaches the Green Children of Woolpit as something akin to an alien encounter.[91] These approaches prefigure my analyses in Chapters II, I, and III respectively. While acknowledging the modern biases encoded in the term "science fiction," Kears and Paz propose that "deliberately anachronistic readings… can encourage us to ask provocative, unexpected questions about medieval culture."[92]

Exploring similarities between medieval romance and modern science fiction, Kathryn Hume proposes that these genres "are related, but not in any direct or simple way." She identifies five links: "explicit borrowing, non-specific borrowing (sometimes via fantasy), the inheritance of a particular type of hero, parallels stemming from shared narrative structure, and similarities deriving from the social function of both literary forms."[93] The first two represent fairly superficial receptions of medievalist tropes, while Hume connects the second pair to a shared Christian heritage and Campbellesque monomythic tendencies, respectively. It is in reference to the fifth that Hume makes her most trenchant argument: "Both medieval romance and science fiction justify an elite in its possession of power." In her analysis, these genres glorify the mechanisms by which feudal lords and technocrats exert control over their societies, while juicing up these legitimizing dramas with enough "sex and violence" to enchant audiences of all

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[90] R. M. Liuzza, "The Future is a Foreign Country: The Legend of the Seven Sleepers and the Anglo-Saxon Sense of the Past," in *Medieval Science Fiction*, ed. Carl Kears and James Paz (London: King's College London, Center for Late Antique & Medieval Studies, 2016): 61-78.

[91] Mary Baine Campbell, "'Those two green children which Nubrigensis speaks of in his time, that fell from heaven', or the Origins of Science Fiction," in *Medieval Science Fiction*, ed. Carl Kears and James Paz (London: King's College London, Center for Late Antique & Medieval Studies, 2016): 117-132. Campbell draws on the work of others who have conceptualized the story of the Green Children in similar terms, e.g., John Clark, "'Small, Vulnerable ETs': The Green Children of Woolpit," *Science Fiction Studies* 33, no. 2 (2006): 209-229.

[92] Kears and Paz, "Introduction," 17.

[93] Kathryn Hume, "Medieval Romance and Science Fiction: The Anatomy of a Resemblance," *The Journal of Popular Culture* XVI, no. 1 (1982): 15.

classes.[94] Ultimately, she relegates both forms to aesthetic insignificance: "great art must be revolutionary, must challenge our assumptions," but writers of romance and sci fi "question too little."[95]

Hume's analysis here highlights ways in which popular literary forms operate as hegemonic discourse, promulgating ideologies of submissive loyalty, masculine aggression, and destructive xenophobia in and around their depictions of the strange and otherworldly. These approaches are hugely important in de-sacralizing these works and highlighting the victims of their mythmaking. At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the subversive potential that Le Goff and Poirion identify in the medieval deployment of the "merveilleux" and the "surnaturel." As I will argue throughout the following chapters, the imaginative fictions of the global Middle Ages frequently critique hierarchies and undermine the ostensibly stable histories and systems upon which they rest. By imaging the past as a site of alterity, medieval writers implicitly questioned the notion that the contemporary conditions of their world—social, political, environmental—were inherent or inevitable. The fictions that result are the epiphenomena of a friction between hegemonic and subaltern historical experience, a tension that extends deeply into individual texts and authors.

By centering the exploration of profound otherness through narrative as a key feature of imaginative medieval accounts of the past, I propose framing these texts as speculative fictions. This term has a contested history, with certain writers asserting hard parameters that would clearly exclude the works examined here. For Robert A. Heinlein, it is essentially a synonym of "hard science fiction," excluding any occurrence "at variance with observed facts"—that is, the

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[94] Hume, "Medieval Romance," 23-24.
[95] Hume, "Medieval Romance," 25.

physical laws of the universe as established by modern science.[96] Margaret Atwood has similarly

insisted that "speculative fiction" should only be about "things that really could happen," thus

excluding not only "dragons" but also "*Star Wars* and most of the TV series *Star Trek*."[97]

But these strict limitations are far from universal. Even without unpacking the prejudices lurking

within the notions of "observed facts" and "what could really happen," we could point to many

definitions that take the opposite view, allowing "speculative fiction" to encompass all of the

imaginative genres outlined above—fantasy, alternate history, and science fiction—along with

varieties of horror, utopian or dystopian tales, and others. The *Collins English Dictionary*

describes it simply as "a broad literary genre encompassing any fiction with supernatural,

fantastical, or futuristic elements."[98] According to the nonprofit Speculative Literature

Foundation:

> Speculative literature is a catch-all term meant to inclusively span the breadth of fantastic
> literature, encompassing literature ranging from hard science fiction to epic fantasy to
> ghost stories to horror to folk and fairy tales to slipstream to magical realism to modern
> myth-making — and more. Any piece of literature containing a fabulist or speculative
> element would fall under our aegis..."[99]

In addition to its exhaustive coverage of twentieth and twenty-first century authors, the

Internet Speculative Fiction Database includes Ferdowsi, Marie de France, the *Mabinogi*,

Culhwch, and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* among its entries. One can imagine that the absence of

other Persian epic poets or the anonymous "Breton *lais*" is largely due to the obscurity of these

works for a predominantly English-speaking userbase.[100]

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[96] Robert A. Heinlein, "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction," in *Of Worlds beyond: The Science of Science Fiction*, ed. Lloyd Arthur Eschbach (Chicago: Advent Press, 1964), 17.
[97] Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 6.
[98] *Collins English Dictionary*, *12th edition,* s.v. "speculative fiction" (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).
[99] "FAQ," Speculative Literature Foundation, accessed April 2, 2020, http://speculativeliterature.org/about/faq/.
[100] Al von Ruff and the ISFDB team, The Internet Speculative Fiction Database, 1995-2020, http://www.isfdb.org/.

The speculative to some degree outflanks questions of medieval fictionality because it does not attempt, as several of the definitions cited above do, to get inside the head of long-dead authors such as Chretien de Troyes or Nezāmi Ganjavi. In the end, we do not have access to their thoughts, only to their writings; and these depict a world manifestly different from the late twelfth century in which both of these masters composed their works. Whether or not they personally believed that magic was sometimes possible, or that reptilian monster might exist somewhere or sometime (odds are almost certainly, yes to both), their literary worlds are animated by imaginative forces to a degree that the world they crafted them in was not. For both of them—as for all the works discussed in this dissertation—the past provided a narratological laboratory in which these speculations could flourish.

Comparing Celtic, Persian, and French

In this introduction, I have laid out a framework through which to conceptualize a global medieval speculative fiction. Before embarking on the central analyses themselves, it is important to contextualize my choice of case studies in medieval Welsh, Persian, and French literature. After sketching a brief history of ways in which these cultures have been linked in the past, I offer my own justifications for this specific set of comparisons.

As Bruce Lincoln notes, "meaning is constructed through contrast. All knowledge, indeed all intelligibility, thus derives from consideration of data whose differences become instructive and revealing when set against the similarities that render them comparable."[101] According to this frame, explicitly comparative study thus accentuates a process that underlies all cognition. Conscientious comparativism, however, acknowledges both the benefits and potential pitfalls of

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[101] Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On, and With Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 25.

its methodologies. In her 2009 essay, "Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique," Ania

Loomba expresses both:

> The most productive potential of comparison is that it can establish connections and relations across seemingly disparate contexts and thus challenge provincialism and exceptionalism… But it is precisely this potential of comparative thought that has fed into the development of 'global' or 'universal' paradigms that posit a hierarchical relation between the entities being compared or simply exclude large chunks of reality from its domain.[102]

Ultimately, Loomba proposes that a "cautious comparativism" can surface globalized

histories which in turn undermine hierarchical universalist constructions, not only of power and

race but of comparison itself. "The irreversibility of comparative terms," she writes, "is itself

shaped by a Eurocentric view of history, and of what we regard as universal and what as

particular." To reverse the terms—to allow subaltern epistemological formations to exert

analytical power—"is to challenge such a view and make available more complete intersections

than have hitherto been visible."[103]

If Loomba's vision is of a careful search for cross-cultural intersections which might

deconstruct hegemonic paradigms, the history of comparison amongst Celtic, Romance, and

Iranian literatures has generally tended in the opposite direction. The modern study of

connections amongst these cultures begins with Sir William Jones (1746-1794), the Welsh

Orientalist and colonial administrator who proposed primordial connections between European

and Indo-Iranian languages. The discovery of this Indo-European family, as it was soon termed,

revolutionized comparative linguistics. Jones, to his credit, seems to have viewed these links

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[102] Ania Loomba, "Race and the Possibility of Comparative Critique," *New Literary History* 40, no. 3, Comparison (Summer 2009): 501.
[103] Loomba, "Race," 518.

primarily as the basis for an enlightened global brotherhood, extolling the virtues of Sanskrit over and above Latin and Greek while promoting abolitionism, advocating for the rights of the rural Welsh, and composing playful hymns to universal goddess-worship.[104]

Over time, however, philologists and comparative mythologists began to extrapolate from empirical linguistic relationships to conjure an imagined Indo-European cultural unity, sited in a fabled *Urheimat* that has been located everywhere from the somewhat plausible (such as the Eurasian steppes or the Anatolian plateau) to the absurd (the North Pole, the lost continent of Atlantis.) Since this proposed culture would necessarily have been illiterate, its proponents have turned to far-flung texts from much later periods, both ancient (the Homeric epics, the Avestan corpus, the *Ṛgveda*…) and medieval (Irish sagas, the Norse *Eddas*, the *Shāhnāmeh*…) In this immense corpus, Celtic and Indo-Iranian texts have a certain cachet. The farthest-flung representatives of the family, they possess both an impressive set of early texts and a perceived exoticism that is easily elided with archaism, a sense of culture undisturbed by time. Prominent scholars—Alexander Haggarty Krappe,[105] Georges Dumézil,[106] Émile Benveniste,[107] Calvert Watkins,[108] and M. L. West,[109] to highlight only a few—have drawn on medieval Celtic, Latinate, and Iranian literatures to reconstruct (or, their critics would say, simply construct) entire mythic structures.[110]

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[104] Michael J. Franklin, "Jones, William," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* XV/1 (2012): 5-11, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/jones-sir-william.

[105] E.g., Alexander H. Krappe, "Arturus Cosmocrator," *Speculum* 20, no. 4 (Oct. 1945): 405-414.

[106] E.g., Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée: L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

[107] E.g., Émile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969).

[108] E.g., Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Watkins' arguments are discussed in more detail in Chapter II.

[109] E.g., M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[110] For a succinct methodological critique, see Wendy Doniger, "The Land East of the Asterisk: Review of *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* by M. L. West," *The London Review of Books* 30, no. 7 (April 10 2008): 27-29. Doniger extends this critique with specific reference to the development of Hinduism, in Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 87-102.

While the trend over time has generally been towards a greater responsibility and critical acuity in the use of these disparate sources, these approaches all engage in a certain essentialization of language, culture, and genetics. Myth and ritual are inextricably tied to language and to the people who speak it, and so even distant descendants of those pioneering Indo-Europeans of the third millennium BCE—including Christian Welshmen and Muslim Iranians on the cusp of the second millennium CE—are driven to replicate primordial patterns in their literature.

However, the difficulties of using medieval texts to illuminate ancient mythological ideas, and vis-versa, have become increasingly apparent.[111] Doing so elides over five millennia of history, the vast majority of it preliterate and unrecorded, and the rest characterized by constant cultural exchange, innovation, and re-formulation. Furthermore, endeavors to reconstruct lost belief systems, for which all proposed evidence is indirect, inevitably import the prejudices of the reconstructer. This is particularly true when the sought-after original is believed to bear powerfully on matters of identity. Stephanie von Schnurbein points out:

> This type of reconstructive scholarship lends itself to the belief that combining de-contextualized fragments from vastly different eras and regions can in fact lead to the identification of deep structures of a deep past in which the origin of one's identity can be found. Such a reconstruction can then supposedly explain the present or help one's own nation or group to regain a proper identity or essence. In other words: it is the construction of a unified, naturalized ethnic identity, which is set against a devalued 'other.'[112]

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[111] Ronald Hutton, for instance, asserts that "…any attempt to find pagan survivals in the characters and motifs of medieval Welsh literature is fraught with problems" to which satisfying solutions remain wanting" (Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 369). Terry Gunnell argues that, in contrast to his central role in the *Snorra Edda*, Óðinn was not a prominent god in pre-Christian Iceland (Terry Gunnell, "How High Was the High One? The Roles of Oðinn and Þórr in Pre-Christian Icelandic Society," in *Theorizing Old Norse Myth*, ed. Stefan Brink and Lisa Collinson (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2017), 105-129).
[112] Stephanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Paganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 282.

As this framing suggests, Indo-European studies has also been haunted since its inception by the specters of fascism, racism and imperialism.[113] The *Journal of Indo-European Studies* is helmed by Roger Pearson, an English Neo-Nazi eugenicist; *Études indo-européennes* was founded by Jean Haudry, an ethnonationalist and avid supporter of the French far-right.[114] Schnurbein argues that it is ultimately difficult to disentangle the field from these abhorrent commitments:

> We can conclude that scholarship of Germanic and Indo-European myth not only incorporates earlier oppositions of 'Aryan versus Semitic' religion, but also has direct ties to German völkisch, Conservative Revolutionary, and National Socialist scholarship… The unifying element between the various academic attempts to understand Germanic or Indo-European myth and religion is their use of fragmented and temporally and spatially scattered sources of evidence, with the goal of reconstructing a common pre-Christian, Germanic, Nordic, or Indo-European worldview, mentality, religion, or social structure. Such attempts at constructing identity academically are dependent on the creation and exclusion of an 'other,' which in many cases is 'the Jew' or the Semite. They thus align themselves all too easily with an overt or latent anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism. Furthermore, they lead to a biased selection of sources from the respective eras, and to the de-contextualization of these sources from the eras in which they originated.[115]

This is not to cast all Indo-Europeanist scholars as racist, nor to discount the valuable contributions of comparative linguistics. It is merely to point out that, especially in its intersections with medieval studies, comparative Indo-European mythology as formulated in many of the foundational works of the field is a minefield of dubious methodology and racialist thinking.

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[113] For an in-depth study of this history and trenchant critique of the field, see Stefan Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*, trans. Sonia Wichmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
[114] Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 121-123.
[115] Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival,* 281.

A different scholarly approach to linking medieval Persian and Western European literatures has been the search for "genetic" connections, seeking to prove that similar motifs or narratives in one cultural zone derive from contact with the other during the course of the Middle Ages. Taking up a theory first advanced by Karl Heinrich Graf in 1869,[116] for instance, Dick Davis has argued that the Tristan legends of Western Europe originate in Fakhroddin Gorgāni's Persian romance *Vis o Rāmin*.[117] In doing so, however, he resorts to far-fetched and undocumented transmissions to explain how similar tropes might have crossed from Iran to Europe in a matter of decades, and modern Celticists have generally found his argument unsatisfactory.[118]

As discussed above, there are certainly texts that exist in Persian, French, and Welsh redactions—the *Sendbādnāmeh*, *Li Romans de Dolopathos,* and *Saith Doethion Rhufain,* for instance, are all reflexes of the "Seven Sages of Rome" corpus. But such cosmopolitan narratives invite less a comparison of specific traditions than an assessment of the complex textual economies and sociocultural linkages of premodern Eurasia. While many studies of the Global Middle Ages fruitfully emphasize these cross-cultural transactions, my approach here is instead to engage with localized narratives, in search of ways in which these turned to a particular mode—what I term the speculative—to engage with fraught issues of communal history.

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[116] Karl Heinrich Graf, "Wis und Ramin," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 23 (1869): 375-433.

[117] Dick Davis makes this argument in several publications, including the Introduction to his masterful translation of *Vis o Rāmin* (Fakhroddin As'ad Gorgāni, *Vis and Ramin*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), xxxiii-xlii).

[118] Joseph Falaky Nagy, "The Celtic 'Love Triangle' Revisited," in *Proceedings of the XIV International Congress of Celtic Studies*, ed. Liam Breatnach, Ruarí Ó hUiginn, Damian McManus and Katharine Simms (Maynooth: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2011), 221-244. Despite devoting considerable discussion to "the search for origins and analogues," Jenny Rowland's recent outline of the Tristan cycle makes no mention of *Vis o Rāmin*, nor, for that matter, any non-European texts (Jenny Rowland, "Trystan and Esyllt," in *Arthur in the Celtic Languages: The Arthurian Legend in Celtic Literatures and Traditions*, edited by Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan and Erich Poppe (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019), 51-64).

This, too, is not completely unprecedented. More convincing than his theories on Tristan, for instance, are Dick Davis's observations on the invocation of allegedly ancient written sources in both Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. He suggests that this trope of the "*liber vestissimus*," which validates each author's text and permits them to embark on inventive narratives, is exactly that—a literary trope more than a historical or source-critical fact.[119]

These questions of narrating origins through appeal to a past, which itself demands careful crafting, are central to my conception of a global Middle Ages as outlined above. It is on this basis, I argue, that the texts explored in this project cohere most powerfully. Welsh, Persian, and French accounts of the legendary past are all the productions of communities deeply interested in historical narrative but wary of the pitfalls that accompany its acquisition and dissemination. Anxieties over the recovery of ancient knowledge are reflected in the ambiguous figures of bards and storytellers. Depictions of these characters as variously heroic, villainous, and tragic seems to reflect a real tension over the value and stakes of such work, while also suggesting a strikingly similar concern with the politics of narrating origins.[120]

This ambivalence can itself be traced into the very groundwork—the "worldbuilding," to adopt the modern speculative fiction term—for the mythic histories of Wales, Iran, and *Bretagne*. These narratives were profoundly shaped by 10th century prophetic traditions, exemplified by the *Armes Prydein* in Wales[121] and the Zoroastrian *Ayādgār-ī Jāmāspīg*.[122] In

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[119] Dick Davis, "The Problem of Ferdowsi's Sources," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1996): 48-57.

[120] Sam Lasman, "Otherworld Treasure and Bardic Disguise: Recovering the Past in Medieval Celtic and Persian Literatures," *Looking Ahead: Global Encounters in the North Atlantic, ca. 350–1300* (A special dossier in *Viator*), ed. Nahir Otaño Gracia, Nicole Lopez-Jantzen, and Erica Weaver (forthcoming).

[121] Ifor Williams, ed., *Armes Prydein,* trans. Rachel Bromwich (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1972). This text is discussed in more detail below (see pages 48-51).

[122] Domenico Agostini, ed., *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2013). See pages 200 (note 11) and 235, including note 91.

strikingly congruent terms, these texts relate stories of indigenes who had lost their sovereignty and organic unity through the depredations of foreign invaders. Eventually, the prophecies foretell, heroes from the past would return and drive out the interlopers. But implicit in these promises was the necessity of constructing a coherent vision of history and populating it with heroic figures whose return had already been wished for. Tragedy and redemption could thus become reified in once-and-future champions.

So compelling were these narratives that they quickly spread beyond the confines of the original communities that had envisioned them. Iranian converts to Islam and their descendants enthusiastically adopted Zoroastrian tales as their authentic heritage,[123] and it is only in the work of the committed Muslim Ferdowsi that these legends achieved their artistic apotheosis. Likewise, the appropriation of Welsh and Breton tales by Anglo-Norman conquerors led to the continent-wide fame of Arthur and his knights—including among the English, the original oppressors excoriated by Welsh historical-prophetic tradition. The immense popularity of the foundational works in both cultural contexts, the *Shāhnāmeh* in the Iranian world and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* in Europe, inaugurated a centuries-long vogue for narratives set in a prophetically-charged past.

These derive their chronological parameters and overall historical narrative from prophetic traditions epitomized. But key to their transformation into literature was their failure as prophecy. What survived kept a powerful teleological drama, but lost the specific urgings of eschatology. The Kayāniān of the *Shāhnāmeh* share names and certain features with figures of the Zoroastrian religious texts, but their esoteric resonances and sacral import are largely lost, left to writers like Sohravardi to re-fashion anew. Likewise, the proto-nationalist import of

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[123] This process is a key theme of Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Arthur, Merlin, and their associated characters for Brittonic speakers, while never entirely lost in its indigenous contexts, was sidelined by the rapid international popularity of their stories. Retaining the dramatic charge of prophetic tragedy while losing particular political resonances, the *matière de Bretagne* was free to acquire new resonances, both abroad and on its native soil.

Very different historical trajectories led both Zoroastrian and Welsh writers of the tenth century to a similar way of narrating their communal past. A further set of socio-political shifts led to these narratives becoming widespread far beyond their original cultural ecosystems. This brought collectors of lore about the past into contact with coveted material that was infused with competing and at times dangerous ideologies, ranging from religious heterodoxy to anti-authoritarian polemic. Their deployment of these materials into new artistic contexts occasionally obscured this content, but only by superimposing new ideologies and relationships to power upon it.

Chapter Outlines

These relationships amongst speculative texts, imagined origins, and medieval societies form the basis of the explorations that follow. While each case study resonates with both the themes raised in this introduction and with one another, the vast majority of my analyses are culturally specific rather than explicitly comparative. This is a conscious attempt to avoid artificial schemes of grand comparison, and instead to allow the particular modes of each case to speak to the decentralized commonalities of speculative fiction in the global Middle Ages. Each of these macro-chapters is titled with a question. This is a gesture not only to the necessarily open nature of literary analysis—particularly into the works of long-vanished authors and eras—but also to the speculative horizons with which each trope is concerned.

The first macro-chapter, "Past and Paradox: What Did It Mean to Time-Travel in Medieval Wales?" will consider medieval Welsh narrative works that engage with the malleable interface of historical time and human experience. Drawing both on medieval theories of temporality and modern literary criticism on time-travel fictions, this analysis explores how medieval Welsh perceptions of their communal existence within a deferred history produced narratives deeply concerned with altered experiences of time. Time travel can here be considered a mechanism for exploding the continuity between past and present, for a gesture towards the conceptualization of fantastic origins as an alternate history. In the Arthurian tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen* ("Culhwch and Olwen"), the quest to marry a giant's daughter becomes a nested series of adventures into other temporalities. A young man takes a group of heroes back into the primordial memories of ancient beings; two warriors' primordial struggle over a maiden projects them towards the end of the universe. *Branwen ferch Llŷr* ("Branwen daughter of Llŷr"), the second of the *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi* ("Four Branches of the Mabinogi"), explores a distant past that is both linked to the present as a site of origin and irrevocably cleaved from the history by political, geological, and affective forces. Following these two earlier texts, the analyses turns to later works that build upon the speculative interventions of their predecessors. *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* ("Rhonabwy's Dream"), a puzzling Arthurian tale found in the *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (compiled between 1382-1410), is among the oldest works anywhere to feature a journey backwards in time. Though many interpretations have centered on its elements of parody and rhetorical display, I center analyses which consider the text's interest in both deterministic systems—games, wars, chronological histories—and ways in which the weirding of time can challenge or upend these structures. The chapter then ends with a reading of Dafydd ap

Gwilym's "Yr Adfail" ("The Ruin"), a 14th century lyric meditation on time's ability to both create and undermine narrative.

By setting historical narratives in the weirded times of speculative pasts, medieval writers allowed their characters to encounter radical alterity in the forms of beings both dangerous and alluring. These encounters, whether violent, erotic, or both, present visions of communal origins rooted in the heterogenous and the uncanny. The second and third macro-chapters in turn address different valences of such meetings.

"Hostile Others: What Did It Mean to Battle the Draconic in the Medieval Iranian World?" investigates struggles between the heroes of Iranian epic poetry and the hostile reptilian beasts known as *azhdahā*, a word often translated as "dragon" but actually originating from an Avestan term meaning "Snake-Man." Downplaying approaches rooted in Indo-European studies and postulated ur-myths of dragons, I instead highlight the comparative insights of monster studies and weird theory, combining these with an in-depth attention to the speculative zoology of medieval Islamicate literary culture. Bursting grotesquely from a tyrant's body in Abolqāsem Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh* ("Book of Kings"), the *azhdahā* reemerges throughout the legendary history of Iran, challenging anthropocentric regimes of control over both nature and time. As Persian epic unfolded from the monumental cultural success of *Shāhnāmeh*, it continually invoked the physical and metaphorical presence of these creatures to interrogate the relationship between humanity, chronology, and power. Though most of these "secondary epic" texts have seen relatively little critical attention, dismissed as derivative and lacking in aesthetic value, this chapter argues for their literary importance, both as intertextual responses to the *Shāhnāmeh* and on their own terms. 'Ali Asadi-Tusi structures his eponymous hero's career around three battles with these beasts in his *Garshāspnāmeh* ("Book of Garshāsp"), juxtaposing these physical

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monsters with the looming "celestial *azhdahā,*" the devouring force of time. Pairing Borzin-e

Āzar's confrontation with a sexually predatory monster and King Bahman's gruesome death in

the jaws of a different *azhdahā*, the *Bahmannāmeh* of Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l-Khayr presents an

alarmingly revisionist take on the usual script of the hero's triumph. In later centuries, poets

continued to employ the figure of the *azhdahā* in creative reconfigurations, epitomized in the

Babr-e Bayān, the "Raging Tiger" defeated by the teenaged Rostam in several early modern

manuscripts. Twisting away from any simplistic symbolic equivalence, the *azhdahā* incubate a

fateful otherness within perceptions of the past.

Finally, the third macro-chapter, "Seductive Others: What Did It Mean to Love the

Otherworldly in Medieval France?" treats a selection of the so-called "Breton *lais*"—short

narrative poems in octosyllabic couplets, written in various dialects of Old French but claiming

descent from originals in Celtic languages—that feature erotic encounters between humans and

otherworldly beings. Rather than considering these beings as "fairies" or "*fées*," as they are often

described in the critical literature, I propose treating them as "parahumans," entities possessing

intimate similarities with the human while also diverging from it fundamentally. This otherness

coheres particularly with regards to space and time. By intermingling with human bloodlines or

whisking their partners out of history, parahumans interweave this alterity into imagined pasts

and futures. Marie de France, creator of the genre in which each of the six texts considered here

participate, both establishes and breaks down the borders between worlds in *Guigemar.* Her

Yonec, in turn, positions the parahuman as a lurking metamorphic potential within earthly

lineages. The anonymous poem *Tydorel* extends this metaphor, depicting the otherworldly as an

insomniac disease that breaks down narrative itself. *Lanval*, *Graelent,* and *Guingamor* all present

variations on the story of a knight drawn out of the strictures and privileges of courtly society

into his parahuman lover's realm. In Guingamor's journey to and from the otherworld that is also a journey to and from the past, the thematic concerns of this dissertation come full-circle.

For writers of the global Middle Ages, speculative imagination provided a vital means of intervening in the past. Against historical hegemonies—not only prevailing accounts, but those actors and polities who promoted particular visions of bygone times and the processes by which these led to the present—the authors whose work is discussed below proposed radical alterities. That their work in turn was often repurposed by hegemonic forces does not negate its subversive power. Rather, it demands a reengagement that looks beyond the distortions of authoritarianism and ethnonationalism, and seeks meaning—*ystyr*, *ma'ni, sens*—within the expansive worlds of the texts themselves.

<center>Chapter I</center>

<center>Past and Paradox:</center>

<center>What Did It Mean to Time-Travel in Medieval Wales?</center>

Introduction

Armes Prydein, Teleology, and Imagined History in Medieval Wales

Sometime in the mid-tenth century,[1] a Welsh writer gave an unusual response to a tax summons. He adopted the voice of the ancient poet-seer Myrddin to write a prophecy. In it, he described the immanent triumph of the Britons and their allies over the would-be tax collectors, the *Saesson* (Saxons). These *allmyn*, "others, foreigners," had oppressed Britain for centuries, and their ruler's demand for Welsh tribute would be their final outrage. Soon, the poet declaimed, the long-dead heroes Cynan and Cadwaladr would return and lead their countrymen to glorious victory. Lost lands would be restored to Welsh dominion, and a new golden age would ensue.[2]

In formulating this vision of the future—known now as *Armes Prydein Vawr*, the Great Prophecy of Britain—the poet needed to adopt a particular perspective on the past. For the Britons to "rise up again" (*atporyon uyd brython*), they needed to have fallen. Their current status as tributaries of a Saxon *mechteyrn* ("Great Leader," usually interpreted as Æthelstan, r.

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[1] T. M. Charles-Edwards proposes a date as specific as 939 (T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons 350-1064* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 533); Andrew Breeze suggests 940 (Andrew Breeze, "Durham, Caithness, and *Armes Prydein*," *Northern History* XLVIII, no. 1 (March 2011): 147). It is worth noting that these dates are much more specific than those provided for nearly any other piece of Welsh medieval literature.

[2] *Armes Prydein*. This and all translations throughout the dissertation from Welsh, Old Irish, Latin, New Persian, Arabic, Middle Persian, Old English, Old Norse, and Old French are my own, unless otherwise noted.

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927-939 CE) had to be explained as a historical anomaly, a sorry prelude to their rightful restoration as "lords whose conquests are their ancestral right" (*teyrned a bonhed eu gorescyn*).

To this need, the poet supplied a narrative. The Saxons had been rootless "shit-people"[3] (*kychmyn*) when they tricked Gwrtheyrn of Gwynedd (better known in the Latin form Vortigern, a ruler traditionally dated to the early- to mid-fifth century) into selling them the isle of Thanet in Kent. After a "treacherous killing"[4] (*rin dilein*), they won wider sovereignty (*mynuer*, literally "a glittering crown") and so came to be "occupying" (*yn anhed*) "the country of the Britons" (*gwlat vrython*). Though largely derived from earlier sources, in *Armes Prydein* this account achieves a dramatic economy of expression never previously attested. Furthermore, by conveying it through consistent allusion rather than straightforward recitation, the poem makes it seem less an artful story and more an undeniable collective truth.

All historical narratives represent radical manipulations of time. Through omission, elision, acceleration, telescoping, and other editing techniques, they craft what Hayden White terms their "emplotment,"[5] a structure that combines events, figures, places, and other elements into a culturally legible account. As Aled Llion Jones notes, the emplotment of *Armes Prydein* is "structured according to a series of returns: the return of foreigners to exile, the return of natural order after intervening chaos, and of course the *mab darogan*" (the reborn hero as "son of

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[3] Bromwich gives the etymology ("*cach + mon*") but caters to delicate Anglophone sensibilities with the somewhat more decorous gloss "wretches, scavengers" (*Armes Prydein*, 75.)

[4] Bromwich connects this to Hengist and Horsa's treacherous massacre of the British nobility as described in the *Historia Brittonum*, an event later referred to as *Brad y Cyllyll Hirion* ("Treachery of the Long Knives") (*Armes Prydein*, 5 and 31.)

[5] See, for instance, Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 37-53.

prophecy"). In combination, these constitute a vision of "return to a united, unified, legendary state of organicism."[6]

It is not necessary to suppose that the poet of *Armes Prydein* was the sole inventor of this historical narrative. He may well have been closely following lost predecessors, or expressing a widely-held cultural viewpoint. But his particular expression proved extraordinarily compelling and successful, regardless of its originality. This may have been, at least in part, because of his depiction of time. The circular structure identified by Jones operates at the nexus of four chronological points. The first two are reasonably straightforward—the poet's own era (the date of composition, perhaps 939 or 940 CE); and the claimed origin of the prophecy, in the vaticinations of Myrddin (who came to be associated with both the reign of Vortigern in the early fifth century, and the Battle of Arfderydd, c. 573 CE).[7] The third point is the moment of divergence between history and foretelling, with the deaths of the historical figures on whom the prophecy's Cadwaladr is based, c. 634-682 CE.[8] Though more than two and a half centuries separate these dates from the poem's composition, the time in-between is functionally blank, barren of evocative potential. Fourth, and crucially, there is the imagined, immanent future in which the prophecy is realized. This future allows the past to recur again, but with a different

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[6] Aled Llion Jones, *Darogan*: *Prophecy, Lament, and Absent Heroes in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 38-39.

[7] A concise but thorough summary of how the character of Myrddin/Merlin arose from a concatenation of poetic allusion, historical references, false etymology, and narrative invention can be found in Rachel Bromwich, ed., *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 458-462.

[8] The Cadwaladr of the *Armes* is an enigmatic character who likely blends elements of three historical figures— Cadwaladr ap Cadwallon, an inconsequential King of Gwynedd who succumbed to plague, perhaps in 682; his alleged father, Cadwallon ap Cadfan, who nearly conquered English Northumbria before being killed in 634 (Jenny Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), 172; Bromwich, *Trioedd*, 299; Glenys Goetinck, "The Blessed Heroes," *Studia Celtica* XX/XXI (Jan. 1, 1985): 100-102; though see Alex Woolf, "Caedualla *Rex Brittonum* and the Passing of the Old North," *Northern History* 41, no. 1 (March 2004): 5-24, for the argument that Cadwallon was a Northern British figure only later inserted into the genealogies of Gwynnedd); and the West Saxon King Caedwalla, who renounced his throne and died as a pilgrim in Rome in 689 (David Dumville, "Brittany and "Armes Prydein Vawr," *Études Celtiques* XX, no. 1 (1983): 154). The composite Cadwaladr of the prophecy thus combines associations of expectation and disappointment, fated occultation and deliberate abandonment.

outcome. Cynan and Cadwaladr, whose historical prototypes were remembered for having gone overseas and left their people to defeat,[9] are imagined as returning to redeem both themselves and their people. These four chronological points (and we might even add a fifth, the later date of manuscript redaction in the mid-fourteenth century) form an associative constellation. Within this dense network of covalent times, linearity is eschewed in favor of a cyclical yearning for renewal through a return to continually re-posited origins. Impending victory coincides with ancestral loss. And to paraphrase Benjamin,[10] every second is the narrow gate through which a postponed history might enter.

This chapter examines the role that encounters with uncanny time play in medieval Welsh narratives set in the past. Unspooling from the apocalyptically charged yet densely nonlinear chronology of *Armes Prydein*, this tradition engages with the strangeness of time to a degree perhaps unparalleled in the medieval world. The manipulations of narrative time undertaken in these texts—journeys back into history, alterations of chronological flow and causality, the drastic divergence of subjective and objective time—recall the innovations of modern speculative fiction. In these moments of supernatural temporality, characters gain access to other chronologies that trouble, haunt, and expand their experience of time. By provoking reflection on the interpenetration of past, present, and future, these works, like their modern counterparts, critique "le postulat d'un savoir historique objectif."[11] In its place, they propose a radical subjectivity of temporal experience. At times, this refusal of linear, "regular" temporality generates an existential melancholia; at others, an exuberant sense of liberation. Often both

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[9] Dumville, "Brittany," 154. Cynan particularly is critiqued in the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* as the leader of one of the "three multitudes that went from this Island, and not one of them came back" (*Trioedd,* Triad 35, 81.)

[10] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 397.

[11] Brenda Dunn-Lardeau avec Marie-Pierre Genest, Geneviève Denis, Anne-Marie Firoux and Alain Biage, *Le Voyage Imaginaire dans le Temps: du Récit Médiéval au Roman Postmoderne* (Grenoble: Ellug, 2009), 31.

valences operate simultaneously within the same text. This ambivalence is perhaps best approached as a structuring principle, rather than an interpretive puzzle; an instantiation of Carolyn Dinshaw's observation that "the present is nonidentical to itself, and it thus constitutes a field in which varying kinds of temporalities get lived out."[12]

The remainder of this introduction offers an overview of some key developments in medieval Welsh literary-political history, which provide important cultural context for the works discussed in the chapter. It then engages briefly with modern theories of time-travel fiction and narrative heterochrony as a means of foregrounding these critical considerations in the analyses that follow.

Making History in Medieval Wales

By the time *Armes Prydein* was composed, Britons were already familiar with stories of how they had lost Britain. Looking east from the rugged uplands they came to occupy over the course of the early Middle Ages, they were compelled to account for how a once-unified Roman province of Celtic-speaking heritage came to be occupied predominantly by Germanic-speaking warlords ruling a Germanic-speaking populace. Gildas, a monk who seemingly lived after the first wave of Saxon conquests,[13] castigated his fellow countrymen for their sins, and regarded foreign invasion as a worthy divine punishment. After the Saxons claimed land in Britain, he

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[12] Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 137.

[13] Gildas connects his birth with *obsessionis badonici montis* ("The Siege of Mount Badon"), a battle that, three hundred years later, the *Historia Brittonum* presents as the climax of Arthur's campaign against the Saxons. However, given the uncertainty over the dating of this event (compounded by the obscurity of Gildas's comment about when the battle occurred—"*quique quadragesimus quartus (ut noui) orditur annus mense iam uno emenso, qui et meae natiuitatis est*"), and Gildas' omission of the name of the British commander (or rather the commander of the *cives*, the Roman citizens), the exact nature of this victory remains difficult to determine (Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Auctores Antiquissimi* 13 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1898), 40). Given Arthur's importance in the heterochronic fictions of medieval Wales, there is a certain irony in Gildas' maddeningly circular dating schema.

wrote, *"inde germen iniquitatis radix amritudinis uirulenta plantatio nostris condigna meritis, in nostro cespite"*[14] ("from then on the seed of evil and the root of bitterness sowed its poison, as we rightly deserved, in our soil.") But the immediate context of Gildas's epistle seems to have been an era when the Saxon threat had abated or been contained through the efforts of champions such as Ambrosius Aurelianus, one of the few historical figures Gildas names. The new British generation, *"tempestatis illius nescia et praesentis tantum serenitatis experta"*[15] ("ignorant of that upheaval and knowing only the present calm"), had turned to sin and infighting. Germanic invaders in Gildas are signs of the Lord's displeasure and catalysts of further woes, but they are not the unique evil of *Armes Prydein*, capable of cleaving a people from their rightful destiny.

Some three hundred years later, in the early ninth century, the compiler of the *Historia Brittonum* provided a groundbreaking account that ran from the ancient arrival of the Trojan Brutus up to his own era. He included the first cohesive tales of the warrior Arthur, and alluded to a belief that the Britons would eventually drive the Saxons out of the island. In doing so, he laid out the chronological framework of British legendary history, and established many of its core figures.

For Ambrosius Aurelianus, the victorious general mentioned by Gildas, the *Historia Brittonum* provides a backstory. The centrality of this tale to British conceptions of their historical destiny makes it worth recounting in some detail. The British King Guorthigirnus (Vortigern) is attempting to build himself a fortress, fearing the depredations of barbarians (including his own Saxon mercenaries.) But the partially built structure keeps vanishing overnight, and Guorthigirnus' council[16] advises him to sprinkle the foundation with the blood of

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[14] Gildas, *De Excidio*, 39.
[15] Gildas, *De Excidio*, 41.
[16] Intriguingly, the text refers to these as *magi*, lending an air of Orientalist mystery and pagan rite to Vortigern's court.

a fatherless boy. Rather than submit to sacrifice, however, the boy he finds suggests an excavation of the ground beneath the site. This endeavor discloses "*duo vermes*" ("two serpents"), one red and one white, which battle ferociously. After an initial setback, the red creature triumphs. The boy explains the meaning of this omen to Guorthigirn—"*vermis rufus draco tuus est… at ille albus draco illius gentis, quae occupavit gentes et regiones plurimas in Brittannia, et paene a mari usque ad mare tenebunt, et postea gens nostra surget, et gentem Anglorum trans mare viriliter deiciet*"[17] ("the red serpent is your dragon… and the white one the dragon of that tribe who occupy many tribes and regions in Britain, and possess it nearly from sea to sea, and hereafter our tribe shall rise up and drive out the English tribes valiantly beyond the sea.") Only after pronouncing his prophecy does the boy reveal himself as Ambrosius. Vortigern, awed, grants him large tracts of land and retreats.

Despite the logical incoherence of the story (Ambrosius is initially presented as fatherless, including by his mother, but in the end reveals he is the son of a Roman consul; the connection between the serpents and the vanishing construction site is never elucidated), it proved immensely influential. In subsequent centuries, the red dragon became the indelible symbol of the Welsh people; a prequel, *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*, was composed to explain how the buried serpents got there in the first place;[18] Geoffrey of Monmouth combined the Ambrosius of the *Historia Brittonum* with the poet-seer Myrddin into the character of Merlin, and the episode of the dragons became a key event in the enchanter's biography.[19] And with the

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[17] John Morris, ed. and trans., *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals* (London: Phillimore, 1980), 71.
[18] Brynley F. Roberts, ed., *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975).
[19] Tellingly, Geoffrey rejects the final assertion of the *Historia Brittonum*'s Ambrosius that he is the son of a Roman consul; Merlinus, in his first and virtually all subsequent incarnations, is the half-human child of an incubus and a nun. This hybrid aspect is discussed in Chapter III (see pages 399-403).

prophetic boy's "*et postea*"—"hereafter," perhaps even "soon"—a tradition of apocalyptic expectation became entrenched in the Welsh view of history's arc.

Yet overall, the *Historia Brittonum* is too scattershot to depict such an arc itself. Its treatment of Arthur is typical of its tendency to provide tantalizing hints that never quite cohere into full-formed plots. The Arthur of the *Historia* is a mighty hero, ever-victorious, slaughterer of Saxons, hunter of a monstrous boar.[20] But he can hardly be called a character. The reader learns nothing of his birth (other than that he may not have been of royal blood[21]) and nothing of his death. Only a hint of familial tragedy creeps in with the enigmatic notice that he killed and buried his son, Amr.[22] His role in the wider scope of British history is unclear; certainly there is no indication of the occultation and possible return for which he later became famous.

So while British historical memories of dispossession were active in the centuries before *Armes Prydein*, they had never been fitted into a single compelling and teleological narrative, such as that poem proposed. It was then left to subsequent storytellers to imagine a past congruent to the *Armes'* charged vision of future history. Even as the triumphant aspirations of the *Armes* went unrealized, and the sovereign fortunes of the fractious Welsh polities steadily

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[20] This "*porcus Troynt*" is widely considered to be an early analogue of the Twrch Trwyth, who features prominently in *Culhwch ac Olwen*.

[21] The text never calls him a king, noting that he fought "*cum regibus Brittonum, sed ipse erat dux bellorum*" ("with the kings of the Britons, though he himself was commander of battles") (*Nennius*, 76). In the *Mirabilia* section, he is simply referred to as "*mīles*," "soldier" (*Nennius*, 42).

[22] Though the *Historia Brittonum* makes no such link, it is tempting to connect this detail both to the more familiar conflict between Arthur and Modredus in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* and subsequent traditions; or to the more general observation, as Glenys Goetinck puts it, that "The tragedy of the loss of Britain is deepened immeasurably by the fact that, to a large extent, the British brought it upon themselves. There is no doubt that they were capable of powerful resistance to any attack and their enemies did not take possession of British territories at their leisure, but the very code which enabled the British warriors to fight so fiercely also laid them open to defeat… the quest for honour could and did degenerate into a narrow self-interest which felt no qualms about compromising regional or national good in order to satisfy a personal whim" (Goetinck, "The Blessed Heroes," 88). Such narratives denied the Saxons a starring role in their conquest of the Island. Rather, they become scavengers, profiting from the carnage among better warriors. This theme of civil conflict, or even "traitors within," appears in *Armes Prydein* both with the double mention of Gwrtheyrn and with the poem's evocation of the resurgent Cymry as "*vn gor vn gyghor vn eissor*"—"of one song, one counsel, one essence," undivided by factional strife.

declined, this vision would generate a vast body of cultural phenomena. Mediated through the French adaptations and expansions that Jean Bodel termed the *matière de Bretagne*, it would achieve worldwide influence.

Whether in immediate response to the *Armes Prydein*, or as an outgrowth of the same sociocultural impulses, other signs of this reformulated history appeared in tenth-century Wales. A mass of poetic material associated with *Yr Hen Ogledd* ("The Old North," the formerly Brittonic-speaking areas of the modern Anglo-Scottish border), some of it perhaps authentically ancient, was reformulated into the epic elegy known as *Y Gododdin,* The name refers to a tribal grouping in south-east Scotland who vanished from the map sometime during the political turmoil of the 6th and 7th centuries CE, with their capital of Din Eidyn (modern Edinburgh) coming under the rule of Anglian settlers from Northumbria.. Whereas the poetic material seems to have originally included diverse praise odes, accounts of battles, and even nursery rhymes, and referenced the Gododdin's wars with a host of enemies ranging from Picts to other Britons to Anglo-Saxons, by the end of the tenth century it had been creatively edited into a more cohesive work.[23] This thousand-line poem repeatedly references a starkly tragic battle in which the Gododdin and their allies from across Britain suffer a devastating defeat against the English of Deira at a place called Catraeth. Only a handful of Gododdin warriors survive the slaughter – perhaps three, or only one, Aneirin, the poet-persona that the poem identifies as its composer.[24]

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[23] Much of this argument derives from T. M. Charles-Edwards's discussion of the poem in (Charles-Edwards, *Wales,* 376-368) and Philip M. Dunshea, "The Meaning of Catraeth: A revised early context for *Y Gododdin*," in *Beyond the Gododdin: Dark Age Scotland in Medieval Wales,* ed. Alex Woolf (St. Andrews: The Committee for Dark Ages Studies, University of St. Andrews, 2013), 81-107. Dunshea notes that Catraeth only seems to gain prominence in the philologically later stanzas of the poem; the earlier ones refer more indiscriminately to a variety of border conflicts. While questioning many of John Koch's theories about the poem, he does quote Koch's speculation that ninth- and tenth-century editors may have altered to text to a fit "an agenda [that], like *Armes Prydein*'s, viewed England as the only enemy" (John T. Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin: text and context in Dark Age North Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. xxxv).

[24] Aneirin's name is known from the *Historia Brittonum*, where he is referenced as one of the great British poets who flourished in the early medieval period, alongside the famed Taliesin ("Shining Brow") and three others, to

Throughout *Y Gododdin*, Aneirin's voice emerges amidst the formulaic descriptions of slain warriors, an anguished cry that focuses and personalizes the poem's overwhelming sense of loss. This loss, moreover, is explicitly politicized. Men from across the Brittonic-speaking world (young men, particularly[25]) fight bravely but futilely against the English. The downfall of the Gododdin becomes a synecdoche for the destruction of *Yr Hen Ogledd*, where Brittonic kingdoms declined precipitously through the seventh century and were definitively erased from the map by the eleventh. These lands remained a potent imaginative site in Welsh poetry and storytelling, "powerfully charging the imagination and the imagined past."[26] This was at least in part due to the sense that they had been "lost," wrenched away from the sovereign unity of Britain. Component by component, is impossible not to read *Y Gododdin*'s narrative as forming a poignant contrast to the triumphant vision articulated by *Armes Prydein*.

At the same time, the Aneirin-poet creates moments that trouble the poem's ostensibly historical surface. Perhaps the most explicit of these is a passage roughly halfway through the text, in which the torrent of martial elegies is interrupted by a description of the poem's composition. This first-person metatextual break depicts a subterranean dwelling in which the poet sits chained.[27] There, "*o gatraeth werin / mi na fi neirin / ... / neu cheint ododdin / cyn gwawr dydd dilin*"[28] ("about the folk of Catraeth / I-not-I, Aneirin / … / did sing *Gododdin* /

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whom no later works were attributed—Talhaearn Tad Awen ("Ironbrow Muse-Father"), Blwchfardd ("Baldbard"[?]), and Cian Gwenith Gwawd (Cian "Wheat of Song") (*Nennius*, 37). But the *Historia* does not associate Aneirin with any particular work, nor indeed with the Gododdin tribe, whose territory it references only once, in passing.

[25] The first elegy in the poem famously begins "*Greddf gŵr oed gwas*" ("Man in might, youth in years") (A. O. H. Jarman, ed., *Y Gododdin* (Llandysul: Gomer Press/The Welsh Classics, 1988), 3 (line 11)).

[26] Marged Haycock, "Early Welsh Poets Look North," in *Beyond the Gododdin: Dark Age Scotland in Medieval Wales,* ed. Alex Woolf (St. Andrews: The Committee for Dark Ages Studies, University of St. Andrews, 2013), 11.

[27] As Patrick K. Ford and Aled Llion Jones have noted, these seem to reference a tradition (or at least a poetic trope) by which ritual death was a prerequisite for inspiration (Patrick K. Ford, "The Death of Aneirin," *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 34 (1987): 41-50; Jones, *Darogan*, 68).

[28] *Y Gododdin*, 32 (lines 470-484).

before the next day's dawn.") Aneirin's description of himself as "I-not-I" anticipates the split subjectivity of Dafydd ap Gwilym's "Yr Adfail," likewise provoked by a poetic reflection on loss. And his "Gododdin" here is both the text and its subject, the latter only accessible (perhaps only extant) due to the former. Acknowledging both identification with and distance from the "historic" Aneirin and Gododdin of the past, the poem insists on the perpetual instant of the creative act, which in turn spurs time forward into the impending dawn. Death becomes a beginning rather than an end, instigator of a narrative that in turn engenders a new temporality.

It took an outsider of uncertain Anglo-Norman heritage to combine the figures and events narrated by the *Historia Brittonum* with the apocalyptic energy of the *Armes Prydein* and the time-jarring pathos of *Y Gododdin.* While drawing heavily on the first two of these texts, in addition to myriad other Welsh and Latin sources, Geoffrey of Monmouth's vast *Historia Regum Britanniae* ("History of the Kings of Britain," completed by 1139[29]) was also exuberantly (even scandalously) inventive. Across a millennia-long saga of largely fictive monarchs, it offered, for the first time, a comprehensive and teleological account of British legendary history. A glorious lineage founded by Trojan exiles culminates in the meteoric career of Arthur, whom Geoffrey makes not only a king but an emperor whose dominion extends across Europe. With Arthur's downfall at the hands of his treacherous nephew and disappearance into Avalon, however, the Britons are left defenseless against the Saxon hordes, and gradually degenerate into the tribal Welsh. In this assessment, Geoffrey's text seems to justify Norman colonial efforts in Wales, as the subjugation of a wasted culture by the superior vigor of a new political order.

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[29] Brynley F. Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britanniae* and *Brut y Brenhinedd*," in *The Arthur of the Welsh: the Arthurian legend in medieval Welsh Literature*, ed. Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman, and Brynley F. Roberts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), 97.

Yet the declining fortunes of the island's natives, like Arthur's mortal wounds, are not final. In a baroque elaboration of the buried-dragons scene from *Historia Brittonum*, Geoffrey has his Merlin character launch into a series of allegorical images that exceed the chronological boundaries of his text. These "Prophecies of Merlin" owe a clear debt to the *Armes Prydein* or its imitators. It can hardly be a coincidence that the last "king of Britain," in Geoffrey's account, is the same Cadwallader who is both the most recent historical figure named in *Armes Prydein*, and one of its promised redeemers. And in filling the nearly half-millennium between the historical end of its narrative in the late sixth century and Geoffrey's own era with unverifiable prediction, *Historia Regum Britanniae* approaches alternate history,[30] a subversive genre which, as Elisabeth Wesseling writes,

> tends to identify sympathetically with those who suffered rather than made history, by redistributing the roles of winners and loser in actual history… it aims to remind us of the power struggles which preceded the institution of a specific distribution of power, and to make us aware of the contingency of the outcome of such historical struggles. If the resultant status quo is contingent, then surely it will not endure forever and can be changed.[31]

By the 12th century, it was abundantly clear that the immanent Welsh *reconquista* predicted by *Armes Prydein* had not come to pass. Anglo-Saxon dominion had indeed been shattered, in 1066, but by yet another wave of foreign invaders who proceeded to subjugate far more of the British Isles than the *mechteyrn* Æthelstan ever did. Yet this political reality is far less important to the narrative structure of Geoffrey's text than the imagined trajectories of

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[30] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen takes a similar view, pointing out that "Geoffrey restored to British history its contingency, its potential to have unfolded otherwise" (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Green Children from Another World, or the Archipelago in England," in *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages: Archipelago, Island, England*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 81).

[31] Elisabeth Wesseling, *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1991), 111.

Welsh legendary history which he adopted. The Britannia of his title is a primordial whole whose reconstitution cannot be dreamed without a perpetual awareness of dispossession. For Geoffrey, "[t]he idea of unity is implicit in the theme of loss and cannot be separated from it."[32]

In time the conquest of Wales became a royal project for the English crown, culminating in the 1282 slaying of Llewelyn ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales. Commemorated thereafter as *Ein Llyw Olaf* ("Our Last Leader"), Llewelyn came to epitomize the doomed struggle of the Welsh against foreign encroachment. As the Middle Ages drew to a close, two leaders of Welsh descent made notable attempts to realize the vision of *Armes Prydein* by challenging English kings. The first of these, Owain Glyndŵr, ultimately failed but earned his own place in Welsh prophetic myth. The second, Henry Tudor, succeeded first in his victory over Richard III and then in his consolidation of a Tudor monarchy that would cement English dominion over Wales through the Laws in Wales Acts of 1535 and 1542, which declared Wales permanently annexed to English dominion.

In his *Darogan: Prophecy, Lament, and Absent Heroes*, Aled Llion Jones writes that an engagement with prophetic poetry—of which anachrony (and, perhaps, asynchrony) is "an essential feature"—"is a vital aspect of developing an understanding of the medieval Welsh literary consciousness."[33] He notes that the words *brut* (legendary history) and *brud* (prophecy) are so close as to be nearly indistinguishable, and are in fact often used interchangeably. *Brut* narratives "are mythologies in that they create patterns of understanding—*mythos*—that enable historical cognition."[34] *Brud*, in turn, can rescue such an understanding from the triumphalist patterns into which official historiography is prone to fall:

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[32] Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth," 102.
[33] Jones, *Darogan*, xiv-xv.
[34] Jones, *Darogan,* 2.

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…it is unsurprising that the medieval Welsh often saw themselves as being on the wrong side of history, and even in the wrong kind of time. If it would take an apocalypse to refigure this narrative sufficiently, then perhaps one should be hoped for. Or more than hoped for: predicted and promised. Political prophecy provides this glance forwards towards a subsequent turn of the wheel of (mis)fortune, taking as a premise the idea that the widening gyres are plural, and that more ripples in time are yet to come.[35]

The circumstances of Welsh medieval history meant that the Welsh saw themselves as dwelling in "a period of separation from history itself (or, at least, from an authentic, original— and originary—native history: from *brut*). They live… in/at a hiatus of history which is an end to be terminated."[36] Jones links this notion of a "history… put on hold"[37] to Walter Benjamin's theses in "On the Concept of History," in which time must pause for meaning to be re-injected from the past, for the present to cite its genealogy.[38]

(De)structures of Chronofiction

Jones's summation of how the cultural outlook of *brut* relies on a set of drastic chronological reconfigurations leaves open the question of how time is manipulated within narratives themselves. As this chapter argues, the alienation that medieval Welsh writers experienced from their own vision of history was capable of producing speculative fictions of time that frequently evoke those which emerged from the alienating forces of industrial-capitalist modernity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[39] These similarities allow modern critical

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[35] Jones, *Darogan,* 3.
[36] Jones, *Darogan,* 231.
[37] Jones, *Darogan,* 235.
[38] Benjamin, "Concept," 391 and 397.
[39] David Wittenberg provides a history of the modern time travel narrative (David Wittenberg, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 30-31; his discussion of candidates for "the first time travel story" appears on 47-48). In Wittenberg's view, time travel narrative as a genre "precipitated out of the partial failures of several other literary types. It is less an invention than an accommodation to a variety of mutually incompatible aesthetic, scientific, and social pressures that, during the last two decades of

approaches towards time-travel fiction to both illuminate the narrative mechanisms of the medieval texts considered in this chapter, and argue for the theoretical sophistication displayed within those texts.

David Wittenberg argues that fiction which foregrounds the manipulation of time is inherently metafictional. Narratives routinely make use of, and readers regularly accept, "quite drastic manipulations of chronology on the level of form—hiatuses, flashbacks, sudden temporal cuts, overlapping events." Therefore, by literalizing the "devices or mechanisms" by which these standard narratological processes happen, time travel fiction becomes "already, and inherently, a fiction explicitly about the temporality of literary form."[40]

Instructively, Wittenberg seems to assume a general rule of "coherence of temporal order in fantastic *fabulas*," whether in modern fantasy such as Tolkien or in the myths and folklore that such "romances" thereby resemble.[41] But the medieval texts in which such "legendary material" survives—such as *Culhwch ac Olwen* or *Branwen ferch Llŷr*—are rarely as straightforward as the retellings or pastiches upon which Wittenberg seems to base these assumptions. Rather, as this chapter argues, they foreground exactly the metafictional concerns with temporality that Wittenberg posits as central to time-travel fiction's *raison d'être*.

In a similar vein, Wittenberg questions whether it is possible for time travel fiction to overcome its inherently "conservative" nature, "which, perhaps surprisingly, tends to restore histories rather than to destroy or subvert them."[42] But this view is contested by Brenda Dunn-

the nineteenth century, both produced and destroyed its immediate literary precursors." Fredric Jameson, reviewing Wittenberg's work, offers an alternate perspective – that "the late 19th-century invention of SF correlates to Walter Scott's invention of the modern historical novel in *Waverley* (1814), marking the emergence of a second – industrial – stage of historical consciousness after that first dawning sense of the historicity of society so rudely awakened by the French Revolution" (Fredric Jameson, ""In Hyperspace." Review of *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* by David Wittenberg," *London Review of Books* 37, no. 17 (10 September 2015): 17-22).

[40] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 5.

[41] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 124.

[42] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 13.

Lardeau and her co-authors in their *Le Voyage Imaginaire dans le Temps: du Récit Médiéval au Roman Postmoderne*, who develop a notion of "*hétérochronie*" by analogy with Foucaultian "hétérotopie." Dunn-Lardeau and her co-authors note that just as language might permit an establishment of non-hierarchical relationships amongst incompatible objects, so it allows a similar operation to be performed on *time*(*s*).[43] The resulting heterochronies allow "un dépassement des limites de la condition humaine que sont l'irréversibilité du temps et la mortalité."[44] At the same time, by a juxtaposition of different historical epochs, these narratives have a "*comparatisme intrinsèque*," specifically suggesting "*une réflexion sur l'histoire ou sur la connaissance historique*."[45] By splitting the past into coexistent and covalent narratives, stories of time manipulation posit *histories* over and against hegemonic and singular *history*.

For Carolyn Dinshaw, fictional heterochrony is both deeply medieval and inherently queering. In her 2012 *How Soon is Now: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, Dinshaw sets out to explore "forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinarily linear measurements of everyday life, that engage heterogeneous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether—forms of being that I shall argue are queer by virtue of their particular engagements with time."[46] Dinshaw draws particular attention to moments of asynchrony in medieval narrative, when characters find themselves "swept into another temporal world"; these "reveal with unusual clarity the constant pressure of other kinds of time on the ordinary, everyday image of one-way, sequential temporality."[47]

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[43] Dunn-Lardeau et al., *Voyage Imaginaire*, 11.
[44] Dunn-Lardeau et al., *Voyage Imaginaire*, 12.
[45] Dunn-Lardeau et al., *Voyage Imaginaire*, 13.
[46] Dinshaw, *How Soon,* 4.
[47] Dinshaw, *How Soon,* 6.

Dinshaw roots her view medieval asynchrony in the time theory of Augustine, laid out most directly in Book 11 of the *Confessions*. This discourse establishes time as a divine creation, inherently good—but also associated with mortality, "which is ultimately an exile from… eternity." Noting that time is reified by experience—we are aware of it, talk of it, recount the past, and predict the future—Augustine nonetheless suggests that we are hard-pressed to escape a present which in fact encompasses all times, past, present, and future (*praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris*). "Some such different times do exist in the mind," Augustine claims, "but nowhere else that I can see. The present of past things is the memory; the present of present things is direct perception; and the present of future things is expectation."[48] According to Augustine, Dinshaw writes, time "is the activity of the mind as it shifts in the present between those temporal modes of memory, attention, and expectation. It is itself *distentio animi*, the distention of the mind, what Ricoeur calls the "contrast between the three tensions" of memory, attention, and expectation. And it is woefully, existentially painful." Life, in other words, can only be experiences as a tragic asynchrony.[49] This notion of *distensio,* life's torturous stretching into different dimensions and temporalities that only salvific unity with the divine can recombine, recognizes a chronological original sin at the root of postlapsarian existence. Human attention is thus always divided, unlike God's (who dwells in "a timeless now")—while human integrity is disrupted and destroyed through the simultaneous awareness and denial of eternity.[50]

This chapter divides into two parts, along roughly chronological lines. The first considers the independent Arthurian tale *Culhwch ac Olwen* ("Culhwch and Olwen") and *Branwen ferch Llŷr* ("Branwen, daughter of Llŷr"), the second Branch of the *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi* ("Four

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[48] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), XI.20.26, as quoted in Dinshaw, *How Soon,* 13.
[49] Dinshaw, *How Soon,* 14.
[50] Dinshaw, *How Soon,* 15-16.

Branches of the Mabinogi"). While both contain remarkable scenes of weirded time, they also operate as paradigmatic accounts of legendary history; they both provide a past and problematize the notion of that past. In contrast, the two texts of the second section—the bizarre Arthurian dream-vision *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* ("The Dream of Rhonabwy") and the Dafydd ap Gwilym poem usually known as "Yr Adfail" ("The Ruin")—are more self-consciously engaged in deconstructing received narratives. Both Dafydd and the anonymous author of the *Breuddwyd* are avid consumers of older tales, and their experimentation is based on a deep familiarity with these traditions. All four texts, however, demonstrate David Wittenberg's contention that any story of uncanny interaction with time operates as "a "narratological laboratory," in which many of the most basic theoretical questions about storytelling, and by extension about the philosophy of temporality, history, and subjectivity, are represented in the form of literal devices and plots."[51]

Wittenberg's narratological approach to time-travel, Dunn-Lardeau et al.'s radically comparative *hétérochronie*, and Dinshaw's engagement with medieval asynchrony all provide important structuring ideas for this chapter. Yet *Culhwch ac Olwen, Branwen ferch Llŷr, Breuddwyd Rhonabwy,* and "Yr Adfail" continually exceed the boundaries of theoretical approaches devised for the fictions of other eras or other literary traditions. Medieval Welsh tales about the past evince strikingly original manipulations of time. These uncanny chronological encounters undermine any sense of a reliable history that leads unproblematically to a unified present. Instead, the past depicted in these works is both immanently accessible and fundamentally unstable. Like the paradigmatic Heisenbergian particle, it shifts under observation.

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[51] Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 2.

Working within the narrative established by *Armes Prydein*, the creators of the works discussed in this chapter nonetheless display a profound awareness of the artificial nature of the historical emplotment proposed by the *Armes*, or, indeed, by any text that claims unproblematic knowledge of ancient beginnings. In depicting the supernatural warping of time, medieval Welsh writers critiqued the notion of fixed and programmatic origins leading inexorably to a teleological destiny. At the same time, they did not sacrifice a sense of history's depth. Indeed, they were able to imagine origins that exceeded official accounts of the world's age and origins. Caught, as Aled Llion Jones argues, in the hiatus of messianic and prophetic chronology, they sought escape through elaborate fictions of journeys through and with time. These "narratological laboratories," to adopt David Wittenberg's term, encourage reflection on the heterochronic nature of all moments even as they resist confinement in an empty present. In order to think with the past, they make it accessible; open it to reconsideration, renewal, and remaking.

Part I.

Untimely Origins: *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Branwen ferch Llŷr*

Among the many innovations Geoffrey of Monmouth wrought upon the basic historical

chronology established in *Historia Brittonum*, one of the more alarming is his assertation that

Brutus' Trojan settlers found Britain already inhabited by a violent aboriginal race of giants.

These were quickly exterminated, leaving the stage clear for intra-human conflict.[52] In Welsh

accounts of the island's history, however, giants linger. While sometimes malevolent, they may

also be admirable monarchs. Their titanic size marks them less as monsters than as *pasts*,

atavistic remnants of a monumental other-time that is, like the enormous king Bendigeidfran,

impossible to contain in ordinary structures.

Giants figure prominently in the two texts discussed in this chapter, *Culhwch ac Olwen* and

Branwen ferch Llŷr. And while they are not the main subject of the current analysis, they act as

apt figures for the sudden intrusions of uncanny temporalities into plots that otherwise depict the

more familiar complications of love and war, hunting and heartbreak. In *Culhwch ac Olwen*,

heroes both excavate the past of the primordial mythic dreamscape in which they dwell, and cast

themselves forwards towards the end of the universe. Nonhuman temporalities proliferate

throughout the tale. The search for a young man from the beginning of time takes a group of

adventurers back into the prehistoric memories of ancient beings; a vicious love triangle

becomes a meditation on the possibility of a post-apocalyptic world. *Branwen ferch Llŷr*, second

of the *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi* (Four Branches of the Mabinogi) begins in a static mythic

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[52] Much later in the text, Geoffrey's Arthur does engage in a brutal battle with a cannibalistic giant—but this one is an interloper from the shadowy wastes of Spain.

tableau, which is then traumatically thrust into time and history. Efforts to recuperate that lost

originary unity result in profound disjunctures between interior and exterior chronologies. In

narrating this confrontation, the text engages with myriad forms of access that people seek across

temporal horizons – including archaeology, resurrection, and time-travel.

While this analysis foregrounds the texts themselves, it also seeks to ground specific images

or tropes within a medieval cultural context. Such a grounding is by no means straightforward.

Catherine McKenna summarizes the difficulties, in regard to the *Pedair Cainc*: "Given a text that

may have been written in North or South Wales, as early as the last quarter of the eleventh

century or as late as the second half of the thirteenth, any effort to read it as a mirror of its milieu

is likely to fall fairly quickly into the trap of circular reasoning."[53] However, she notes that

certain factors would have been common across this spatial and temporal expanse. Particularly,

Welsh sovereignty was continually threatened (and increasingly eclipsed) by Norman colonial

incursion from the East.[54] As such, the ongoing anxieties over sovereignty, authority, and

territorial integrity expressed in these texts – most succinctly through epithets such as

Bendigeitfran's identification as *brenhin coronawc ar yr ynys hon, ac ardyrchawc o goron*

Lundein ("crowned king over this island, and invested with the crown of London")—"inhabit a

cultural space in which political unity is lost and longed for with some degree of hope." Under

these conditions, lore about the past "occupies a perpetual prophetic moment, in which past

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[53] Catherine McKenna, "The Colonization of Myth in *Branwen Ferch Lŷr*," in *Myth in Celtic Literatures (CSANA Yearbook 6)*, ed. Joseph Falaky Nagy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 107-108.

[54] Helen Fulton similarly positions the *Mabinogi* and its associated tales as "the products of conquest and the Norman colonization of Wales. They look backwards to a past filled with heroes and forwards to a time of political unity. They express the importance of geography and the mapping of territory in a time of hostile land-grabs, using real place names to claim ownership and delineate areas of power… Furthermore, they insist on the importance of oral memory and legends of the past as sources of truth at a time when documentary records and the political future are largely out of Welsh hands" (Helen Fulton, "Magic and the Supernatural in Early Welsh Arthurian Narrative: *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*," *Arthurian Literature* XXX (2013), 7).

wholeness and hoped for future recovery of that wholeness are brought into contact in a story or a line of verse that speaks hope for the future by drawing upon the past."[55]

Yet by continually interpenetrating past, present, and future, both *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Branwen ferch Llŷr* leave open the question of how, and if, these evocative strands can be disentangled. Both narrate a past that is so shot through with other temporalities that it becomes ultimately impossible to reconstitute as linear history. Remembrance and expectation, origin and destiny, become caught up in an epistemological gyre. And while the texts offer various avenues of escape from this maelstrom, they are also packed with troubling discontinuities that prefigure the more explicit chronological dilemmas of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and *Yr Adfail*, discussed in Part II of this chapter.

1. Nature and/of Time in *Culhwch ac Olwen*

A queen curses her young stepson to remain a virgin until he sleeps with the daughter of the Chief Giant. Fortunately, the young man's cousin is Arthur, who places himself and his vast retinue of superhuman warriors at the lad's disposal. After a long search, they find the giant's fortress, and the beautiful maiden within it. But her fearsome father demands a set of impossible tasks before he will give her in marriage, since her marriage is fated to mean his death. Among these challenges is the hunting of a monstrous boar, who can only be tracked by a mysterious huntsman, occulted since the distant past. Undaunted, Arthur's warriors take on the tasks, employing their strength, magic, and cunning to achieve each of the labors. To find the elusive huntsman, they engage the help of prehistoric beasts, whose knowledge reaches back beyond the

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[55] McKenna, "Colonization," 113.

horizons of human cognizance. And though the boar wreaks destruction across the land in the course of the hunt, eventually the hunters succeed. The Chief Giant is brutally sacrificed at his daughter's wedding feast; and the young man wins his bride.

Culhwch ac Olwen (occasionally *Mal y kavas Culhwch Olwen*, "How Culhwch[56] Got Olwen") is a singular artifact, one of the earliest Welsh prose narratives and the only extant complete Welsh narrative of Arthur that is believed to originate before the hero's popularization beyond the Brittonic world by Geoffrey of Monmouth.[57] It survives in two manuscripts, an incomplete version in *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* (The White Book of Rhydderch, completed in the mid 14th century) and a finished but less authoritative text in *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (The Red Book of Hergest, completed c. 1382-1400).[58] Simon Rodway has suggested that the orthography of the *Llyfr Gwyn* text suggests a composition date "in the second half of the twelfth century"[59] (perhaps specifically during the reign of Rhys ap Gruffudd of Deheubarth, 1155-1197),[60]

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[56] The hero Culhwch is himself somewhat of an anomaly, "unknown in Welsh sources other than the story in *WM* and *RM* which bears his name" (*Trioedd,* 316). His name likely means "slender pig," (Sioned Davies, trans., *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 266), though the author of his eponymous narrative apparently thought it meant "hog run," providing the story of his birth in a pig sty to justify the name. Patrick Ford has argued that this porcine name links the hero to Moccus, a Gaulish divinity whose name likewise means "pig"; connecting this etymology with the hunt for the Twrch Trwyth, Ford suggests that the tale as a whole is a "vehicle for handing on native traditions of the swine god" (Patrick K. Ford, "A Highly Important Pig," in *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture: A Festschrift for Eric P. Hamp*, ed. A. T. E. Matonis and Daniel F. Melia (Van Nuys, CA: Ford & Bailie, 1990), pp. 292-304 at 294.) Yet without relying on cultural continuity between Roman-era Burgundy and medieval Wales, it is still possible to argue the Culhwch's unusual name would have drawn attention to itself as an archaic anomaly—even if the enigma is somewhat undermined by the text's (tongue-in-cheek?) insistence that the name simply means "Pigpen."

[57] Simon Rodway questions whether the text is indeed *prior* to *Historia Regum Britanniae*, dating it the mid-twelfth century, but concedes that "I can find no definite echoes of *Historia Regum Britanniae* in *Culhwch ac Olwen*" (Simon Rodway, "The Date and Authorship of *Culhwch ac Olwen*," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, no.49-52 (2005-06): 40).

[58] These are the dates preferred by Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, which holds the *Llyfr Gwyn* in its collections (("The White Book of Rhydderch," Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, accessed March 17, 2020, https://www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/the-middle-ages/white-book-of-rhydderch/). C. W. Sullivan III proposes 1300-1325 for the *Llyfr Gwyn* and 1375-1425 for the *Llyfr Coch* (C. W. Sullivan III, ed., *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), xv), but the later date for the former and narrower range for the latter now seem more likely.

[59] Rodway, "Date," 32.

[60] Rodway, "Date," 43.

doubting the possibility of an earlier version in Old Welsh orthography (i.e., from the period before the early twelfth century.)[61]

Impossible Times

Time's mutability—or perhaps its vulnerability to manipulation—is demonstrated early in the text. As she lies dying, Culhwch's mother Goleuddydd ("Daylight") asks her husband Cilydd mab Celyddon Wledig for a promise: "*Marw uydaf i o'r cleuyt hwnn, a gwreic arall a uynny ditheu. A recdouyd ynt y gwraged weithon. Drwc yw iti hagen llygru dy uab. Sef y harchaf it na mynnych wreic hyt pan welych dryssien deu peinawc ar uym bed*"[62] ("I will die of this sickness, and you will get another wife. And wives are gift-givers now; but it is bad of you to harm your son. So I ask you—do not get a wife until you see a briar with its two ends in the earth[63] on my grave.")

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[61] Rodway, "Date," 37. Rodway's dates fall somewhat later than most previous proposals, and his article does not comment on the chronological relationship between *Culhwch ac Olwen* and the *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi* (other than noting that the latter evince slightly more French loanwords, p. 25). John T. Koch has observed that though the language of *Culhwch ac Olwen* seems substantively older than that of the *Pedair Cainc*, scholars tend to advance a similar range of dates for both (mid-11th to early 12th centuries). He proposes that linguistic and stylistic factors could be taken to separate the texts by "a century or more," though he leaves open the possibility that "other nonchronological factors," including "genre, dialect, literary school, and relative proximity to oral tradition," may account for the divergence (John T. Koch, "Review*: Culhwch and Olwen: An Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale,* by Rachel Bromwich & D. Simon Evans," *Speculum* 71, no. 1 (Jan., 1996): 133). Helen Fulton positions *Culhwch* quite specifically "between 1090 and 1100" (Fulton, "Magic," 8). Ned Sturzer questions much of the logic that has led to the relative dating of the text, but provides no alternative solution (Ned Sturzer, "The Purpose of *Culhwch and Olwen*," *Studia Celtica* XXXIX (2005): 166-167). Part of the problem is that both *Culhwch ac Olwen* and the *Pedeir Keinc* occur solely in the same two later medieval manuscripts, making relative dating difficult.

[62] Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, eds, *Culhwch and Olwen*: *an edition and study of the oldest Arthurian tale* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), 1.

[63] This rather long-winded translation for *dryssien deu peinawc* is suggested by *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, s.v. "drysi," http://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html). For comparison, Davies has only "a two-headed briar," Guest "a briar with two blossoms." But "a briar with its two ends in the earth" has intriguing correlates. An Irish manuscript reported in *The London Literary Gazette* uses the same phrase to indicate a curse of desolation – "Oh, Gerald! of stinted growth and laugh of guile, may desolation reach the threshold of thy door—a bramble with its two ends in the earth—a green lake overflow the surface of thy hall—the hawk's nest in the chimney of thy mansion—and the dung of goats in the place of thy bed!" ("Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy," *The Literary Gazette; and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, etc., for the year 1831* (London: 1831): 631). Reverend Hilderic Friend notes that "Drayton tells us that a Bramble "which at both ends was rooted deep," was in

Goleuddydd couches her request in terms of natural progression and order. Death, remarriage, and the uncertain status of a child in a parent's second marriage – these are all facts of life, and Goleuddydd expresses them in simple indicatives (even *Drwc yw iti hagen llygru dy uab*, which might be read with a more subjunctive meaning—Sioned Davies translates "But you would be wrong to harm your son."[64]) The condition she places on Kilyd is likewise presented as a simple wait until nature takes its course—until her grave becomes overgrown enough for two-ended briar to appear on it.

But Goleuddydd does not trust time's action. She intervenes to thwart natural growth—"*Galw y hathro attei a oruc hitheu ac erchi idaw amlymu y bed pob blwydyn hyd na thyffei dim arnaw*"[65] ("She called the cleric to her, and asked him to scour the grave every year, so that nothing might grow on it.") The cleric's actions create an illusion of timelessness. Nature is literally held back, and the queen's grave is kept immaculate. This tension between time and human agency will appear later in *Culhwch*, in the sequence of the Oldest Animals,[66] and receive meditative poetic treatment in Dafydd ap Gwilym's "Yr Adfail," discussed later in this chapter.[67] In all cases, it suggests that time's steady progression is in fact vulnerable to human intervention; that narrative and history both require a rupture in time's impersonal surface.

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magic much availing; and in Sussex children are still sometimes cured by being passed nine times through at sunrise on nine successive mornings" (Hilderic Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore* (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1884), 373). The Drayton reference is from his "Nymphidia," lines 401-404 ("Then thrice under a briar doth creep, Which at both ends was rooted deep, And over it three times she leap ; Her magic much availing") while the cure-custom is also reported from the Peaks district (Guy Le Blanc Smith, "Dicky of Tunstead," *The Reliquary and Illustrated Archaeologist* XI (1905): 229, which notes "These [plants] are by no means common.") While it is impossible to say without direct evidence, there may have been particular resonances or associations with such a plant – and while the attestations of the 17th and 19th centuries are of limited value, it is nonetheless appealing to speculate that such associations may have had something to do with desolation (as in the Irish example), fertility and children (as in the British folklore), or simply arcane power (as in Drayton). In the context of the current discussion, it may also be relevant that such a plant, by growing into the soil from which it came, would seem represent cyclical (or even reversed) rather than forward-moving or teleological time.

[64] Davies, *Mabinogion*, 179.
[65] *Culhwch*, 1.
[66] See pages 81-95.
[67] See pages 173-190.

After seven years, however—a length of time both fraught with ritual-folkloric significance, and plausibly long enough—Goleuddydd's cleric neglects his duty, and the expected briar grows. Cilydd mab Celyddon spots it, and promptly sets about remarrying. On the advice of his counselors, he identifies a suitable match, invades her land, kills her husband, and takes her as his own.

For Bromwich and Evans, scenes like this situate *Culhwch* in "an archaic world whose primitive manners lie beyond our sympathy and comprehension," one in which there is "a total absence of compassion." The plethora of "crude barbarities" outstrip even the pervasive violence of the *Pedair Cainc*, establishing "a complete lack of moral perspective" in the tale. However, Ned Sturzer challenges this reading, both its "untenable view that human cultures move from brutality to civility" and its devaluing of the moments of genuine emotion in the text – to say nothing of the pervasive humor and irony which Sturzer (following Joan Radner)[68] reads as central to the tale's aesthetic.[69] Between these poles of primordial bloodshed and misogynist irony, however, it is possible to read Cilydd's second marriage as the opening entry in the text's exploration of how destruction and reproduction together shape time's forward momentum. Whether this is a material dialectic demanding heroic struggle, or a cosmic dynamic equilibrium that exists beyond mortal agency, *Culhwch ac Olwen* certainly seems less interested in apportioning moral judgment than in conjuring narrative scenarios which meditate on time, change, and the horizons of possibility.

When Culhwch's new stepmother tells him "*Gwreicca yssyd da iti, a mab*" ("Marrying would be good for you, lad") and proposes that he marry her daughter, it is the boy's own

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[68] Joan N. Radner, "Interpreting Irony in Medieval Celtic Narrative: The Case of *Culhwch ac Olwen*," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 16 (1988): 41-59.

[69] Sturzer, "Purpose," 146. Sturzer's claim here that "the relative lack of importance of the wife for the husband or the husband for the wife" (146) constitutes a humorous through-line for the text is less convincing.

invocation of untimeliness that sparks the rest of his story. "*Nyt oed y mi etwa wreicca*," he complains, "It's not time for me to marry yet." Culhwch's complaint mirrors his late mother's request that her husband postpone marriage, though his reasons seem more developmental than sentimental.[70] Given the familial model of wooing, however—his father's violent kidnapping of another man's wife—Culhwch's reluctance may be as much a declaration of his unreadiness to engage in masculine bloodshed as it is of pubescent uncertainty or leeriness over the specter of incest. In the end, however, Culhwch's wooing of Olwen will occasion far more destruction than anything wreaked by his father.

The lad's protest provokes his stepmother's crude curse—"*Tyghaf tyghet it na lath[o] dy ystlys vrth wreic hyt pan geffych Olwen merch Yspadaden Penkawr*"[71] ("I destine a destiny on you, that your flank not thump against a woman until you get Olwen, Yspaddaden Chief-Giant's daughter.") This *tynghet*, a "destiny" somewhat akin to the Irish *geis*, bears an unusual relationship to time. By forcing two events into causal relation, Culhwch's stepmother seeks control over the future, reclaiming the agency denied her by Cilydd even as she constrains her stepson.[72] And just as Goleuddydd abstracted the affective timeline of grief into the impersonal time of vegetative growth, so Culhwch's stepmother ties the destined future to a depersonalized sex act—it is not Culhwch but his *ystlys*, his side or flank (used here euphemistically), that will

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[70] Culhwch's age is unclear. He is born, and subsequently given out in fosterage (*meithrin*); his mother's illness follows this with the adverbial *gwedy hynny*, "after that." Seven years then elapse before Kilyd takes his new wife, who learns of and summons Culhwch to her presence *dytgweith*, "one day." His and his stepmother's differing views on his suitability for marriage may suggest that he is an adolescent, on the brink of maturity—he certainly seems considerably older than seven, though that is the only chronological fix provided by the text.

[71] *Culhwch*, 2.

[72] Stefan Schumacher endorses this reading in his article on the etymology of *tynghet*—"Here, what the stepmother has imposed on Kulhwch is strong enough to determine the course of events from the very moment that it has been uttered." He points out, however, that the gradual collapse of the distinction between *tynghaf*, 'I destine,' and *tyngaf*, 'I swear,' during the Middle Welsh period, makes it unclear if the scribes of the relevant texts "still understood the verb or whether they thought it meant 'I swear'" (Stefan Schumacher, "Old Irish Tucaid, Tocad and Middle Welsh Tynghaf Tynghet Re-Examined," *Ériu* 46 (1995): 55).

thump (*latho*—literally, hit or strike) against a woman (or wife—*wreic* has both senses). Her *tynghet* puts Culhwch at the service of his sexual urges. He will get the giant's daughter; then, his body will be able to take its rough pleasure.

Immediately upon hearing this destiny, however, "*Lliuaw a oruc y mab, a mynet a oruc serch y uorwyn ym pob aelawt itaw kyn nys rywelhei eiroet*"[73] ("The lad blushed, and love for the maiden went into all his limbs, though he'd never seen her before.") It is unclear if this is another quality of the *tynghet*, compelling its target towards the destined action; or if it represents some supernatural power in Olwen's name; or if it is simply an ornate account of an adolescent's first stirrings of sexual desire, occasioned by his stepmother's graphic description of intercourse. In any case, Culhwch's affective response to the *tynghet* completes the temporal scheme over which it holds sway—*now* until *he gets Olwen*. Emphasizing that he has never seen Olwen before allows the text to highlight this moment of narrative instantiation, dividing its magic (whether truly supernatural, or metaphorical and physiological) from the pigsties, weed-trimming, and casual brutality that have come before. Indeed, from the invocation of Olwen onwards, the text leaves the (broadly) realistic world of its opening scenes, and never looks back.

From here on, *Culhwch ac Olwen* will be structured around three immense catalogues, which evoke myriad narratives even as they hold back the narrative flow of the story itself. These are the "Court List," the roster of Arthur's court that Culhwch delivers to ensure his cousin's support;[74] the "*anoethau*" ("impossibles,") that Ysbaddaden demands as his daughter's bride-price;[75] and the hunt of the monstrous boar Twrch Trwyth, which though it conveys action rather than verbal enumeration, is in effect a list of places through which the hunt runs and of

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[73] *Culhwch*, 2-3.
[74] *Culhwch*, 7-13.
[75] *Culhwch*, 21-28.

men killed or injured by the boar and its sounder.[76] Together, these montages comprise nearly half of the tale's length. Accounting for them in modern critical terms can prove difficult—Patrick Sims-Williams notes, perhaps only half-jokingly, that "it is hard not to suspect [*Culhwch*'s] author of a provocative, Dadist delight in bringing the fiction to a standstill."[77]

The first catalogue, the "Court List," is the most defiantly non-narrative of the three. Rather than actions to be done, or a sequence of locations traversed by Arthur's cavalcades, it presents only characters—or rather names, since most of those mentioned receive no further description. It invokes stalwart Arthurian figures, like "*Kei a Bedwyr*" (Sir Kay and Sir Bedivere of later romance, though even more prominent in this tale); misspelled Irish champions of the Ulster Cycle, including "[*C*]*nychwr mab Nes a Chubert m Daere, a Fercos m Poch, a Lluber Beuthach, a Chonul Bernach*" (Conchobar mac Nessa, Cú Roí mac Dáire, Fergus mac Róich, Lóegaire Búadach, and Conall Cernach);[78] and heroes who seem to recall figures of Greek mythology, including "*Echel Uordvyt Twll*," "Achilles Mighty-Thigh," and "*Calcas*" (here identified as "*mab Kaw*," son of Kaw).[79] There are figures from other Welsh narrative cycles, including "[*T*]*eliessin Penn Beird, a Manawedan mab Llŷr*"[80] ("Taliesin Chief-Bard," known from the *Historia Brittonum* and the book of verse that bears his name; and Manawydan fab Llŷr, eponymous hero of the Third Branch of the Mabinogi). We meet historical clerics, including *Gildas* (the sixth-century author of *De Excidio Britanniae*, and identified here as "*mab Kaw*," son of Kaw) and *Sulyen mab Iaen*[81] (whom Bromwich and Evans link to the famous 11th

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[76] *Culhwch*, 37-41.
[77] Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 136.
[78] *Culhwch*, 7.
[79] *Culhwch*, 8. Bromwich and Evans discuss their mythological resonances on 75 and 78, respectively.
[80] *Culhwch*, 8.
[81] *Culhwch*, 8.

century abbot of Llanbadarn Fawr[82]), as well as royals from across the Channel, including

"*Sberin mab Flergant brenhin Llydaw*"[83] ("Sberin son of Flergant, King of Brittany" –

"Flergant" is Alan IV Fyrgan of Brittany, d. 1119, and his son here perhaps Brian fitz Count,

Lord of Abergavenny[84]) and "*Gwilenhen brenhin Freinc*"[85] ("Gwilenhen King of France," whom

Bromwich and Evans note is "very probably" William the Conqueror[86]). These two coexist with

an onomastic construct whom logic would seem to demand belongs to an earlier era—"[*P*]*eris*

brenhin Freinc - ac am hynny y gelwir Kaer Paris"[87] ("Peris king of France—and from him, it's

called the City of Paris"). There is Osla Gyllellfawr[88] ("Osla Big-Knife"), who—as discussed in

a later section of this chapter—will appear in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* as the leader of Arthur's

Saxon foes, but here is unproblematically part of his retinue; and "*Gwrhyr Gwalstawd Ieithoed -*

yr holl ieithoed a wydat"[89] ("Gwrhyr Interpreter of Languages—he knew all languages"), whose

epithet *gwalstawd* is a borrowing from the Old English *wealhstod*, "interpreter."[90] Ironically

enough, the first element of this compound means "Welsh, foreign"—a *wealhstod* was originally

one who understood the speech of indigenous Britains and Latinate continentals. Amidst all these

recognizable figures, there are purely folkloric characters identified by their supernatural

qualities, like "*Clust mab Clustueinat—pei cladhet seith vrhyt yn y dayar, deng milltir a deugeint*

y clywei y morgrugyn y bore pan gychwhynnei y ar lwth"[91] ("Ear son of Hearer—though he were

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[82] *Culhwch*, 76.
[83] *Culhwch*, 8.
[84] *Culhwch*, 79-80.
[85] *Culhwch*, 10.
[86] *Culhwch*, 98.
[87] *Culhwch*, 10.
[88] *Culhwch*, 10.
[89] *Culhwch*, 13.
[90] *Culhwch*, 105.
[91] *Culhwch*, 13.

buried seven fathoms in the earth, fifty miles away he would hear the ant in the morning, when it gets out of bed.") Some of these segments spin into pure onomatopoetic revelry—

> *Bwlch a Chyuwlch a Seuwlch, meibion Kledyf Kyuwlch, vyron Cledyf Diuwlch. Teir gorwen gwen eu teir yscwyt, tri gouan gwan eu tri gwayw; tri benyn byneu eu tri chledyf; Glas, Glesic, Gleissat eu tri chi, Call, Kuall, Kauall eu tri merch; Hwy Dydwc a Drwc Dydwc a Llwyr Dydwc eu teir gwraged; Och a Garym a Diaspat eu teir vyryon; Lluchet a Neuet ac Eissywed eu teir merched; Drwc a Gwaeth a Gwaethaf Oll eu teir morwyn.[92]*

—which a somewhat free translation might render—

> Gap and No-gap and Such-a-gap, sons of Gladius No-gap, grandsons of Gladius Gapless. Three glowing glistenings their three shields, three stabbing stabbers their three spears, three keen carvers their three cutlasses. Silver, Sliver, Salmon their three dogs, Sharp and Speedy and Steed their three horses; Late-Weaner and Bad-Weaner and Full-Weaner their three wives; Eek and Screech and Scream their three grandsons; Lightning and Longing and Lack their three daughters; Bad and Worse and Worst-of-All their three maids.[93]

Troublingly, there is also a trio of characters defined by their fates at Camlan, the final battle in which Arthur and all his court will be destroyed:

> *Moruran eil Tegit—ny dodes dyn y araf yndaw yGhamlan rac y haccred, pawb a tybygynt y uod yn gythreul canhorthwy; blew a oed arnaw mal blew hyd. A Sande Pryt Angel—ny dodes neb y wayw yndaw yGhamlan rac y decket, pawb a debygynt y uod yn engyl canhorthwy. A Chynwyl Sant—y trydygwr a dienghis o Gamlan; ef a yscarwys diwethaf ac Arthur y ar Hengroen y uarch.[94]*
>
> (Morfran [Great Raven] son of Tegit – no man struck him with weapons at Camlan because of his ugliness, everyone thought he was an attending devil; there was hair on him like a stag's hair. And Sandde Angel-face – no one struck him with a spear at Camlan because of his beauty, everyone thought he was an attending angel. And Saint Cynwyl – the third man who escaped from Camlan; he left last, with Arthur, on Hengroen [Old Hide] his horse.)

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[92] *Culhwch*, 12.

[93] As if to drive the joke home, Yspaddaden Chief-Giant later demands that Culhwch acquire the help of this formidable clan for the hunt of the Twrch Trwyth.

[94] *Culhwch*, 8-9.

This is not a prophecy—rather, it is presented in the past tense, a finished story. If this is read as a narratorial comment, outside the story's interior time-flow, it need not disturb the surface of the tale. But the blatant anachronism of the 11th-12th century *Flergant* and *Gwilenhen* inhabiting the same space-time as the 6th century *Teliessin* and *Gildas* (and, furthermore, the association of these historical or pseudo-historical figures with explicitly mythological and folkloric characters) means that there are no grounds for placing this story of Camlan in *any* particular chronological arrangement to the rest of the narrative. The events at Camlan are key to the identities of Morfran, Sandde, and Cynwyl, and so must be imagined concurrently with the introduction of these figures.

The chronological telescoping of the Court List troubles the audience's perspective on the text. No longer drawn straightforwardly through the narrative, the reader or listener is now asked to collapse the living warriors addressed by Culhwch with both their memorialized corpses at Camlan and their narrativized lives, linked by a text that transcends linear history. The evocative nexus of times that *Armes Prydein* employs to sustain its narrative of dispossession and triumph is here reconfigured into an anti-narrative, a denial of historical emplotments and the causality they entail.

Joseph Falaky Nagy disputes the idea that any significant temporal dislocation occurs in the hero's journey to Arthur's court, or the subsequent enumeration and dispersal of Arthur's warriors—"…there is no indication that Culhwch's visit to Arthur's court constitutes a return to the past. Nor is there any reason to view Arthur and his men's emerging from that court in search

of what Culhwch needs as an eruption of the past into the present or a "later" past…"[95] Indeed, the "Court List" stages nothing so nostalgically comfortable as a return to past glory. Rather, it explodes temporality—mocks it, destroys it, then gleefully sets about rearranging the pieces.

While this chapter will not devote as much space to the subsequent lists, it is interesting to note that Ysbaddaden's enumeration of the *anoethau,* the superhuman feats that must be accomplished to win his daughter, begins by asking Culhwch to overcome natural cycles of time. Once again, as with Goleudyt's request to her husband, these are couched in terms of vegetative growth: "*A wely di y garth mawr draw? … Y diwreidyaw o'r dayar a'e losci ar vyneb y tir hyt pan uo glo hwnnw a'e ludu a uo teil itaw a uynhaf; a'e eredic a'y heu hyd pan uo y bore erbyn pryt diwlith yn aeduet, hyd pan uo hwnnw a wnelit yn uwyd a llyn y'th neithawrwyr ti a merch. A hynny ol[l] a uynaf y wneuthur yn un dyt.*"[96] ("Do you see the great thicket over there? … Uprooting it from the earth and burning it on the face of the ground, so its cinders and ashes fertilize it in the best way; and its ploughing and sowing so that by morning, before the dew evaporates, it's ripe; so that it can be made into food and drink for your wedding-guests, and my daughter's. And all that I want done in one day.")

This challenge prompts Culhwch's reply, "*Hawd yw genhyf gaffel hynny, kyd tybyckych na bo hawd*," ("It's easy for me to get that, though you think it won't be easy,") to which the giant's response is "*Kyt keffych hynny, yssit ny cheffych...*"[97] ("Even if you get that, this you won't get: …")—a refrain that continues throughout the Chief Giant's specification of the required labors. Many of the *anoethau* are never completed in the text, and this first task is no

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[95] Joseph Falaky Nagy, "Hearing and Hunting in Medieval Celtic Tradition," in *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. Stephen O. Glosecki (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in collaboration with Brepols, 2007), 135.
[96] *Culhwch*, 21.
[97] *Culhwch,* 21-22.

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exception. It is perhaps assumed that these unfinished challenges are accomplished "off-stage"—certainly Ysbaddaden doesn't hold Culhwch and his companions to account for any of them. But the particular non-depiction of this labor, and the fact that it specifically occasions Culhwch's response (which he then repeats for each successive *anoeth*), perhaps suggests that the abrogation of normal temporalities is already accomplished by this point in the story. Ordinary timing has already been broken, and once that is done, straightforward agricultural labor does indeed seem simple (if perhaps not exactly *easy*), compared to the quests and monster-hunts that follow.

Prehistoric Beasts

Among the marvelous feats Ysbaddaden asks of Culhwch, the need to acquire a comb, shears, and razor from between the ears of the terrible boar Twrch Trwth acts as an overarching organizer for a number of subquests. Roughly half the *anoethau* relate in some way to it. The most involved of these subquests, other than the hunt itself, is the search for *Mabon mab Modron*, Mabon son of Modron. It is this section—particularly the journey amongst the "Oldest Animals" with which it begins—that Joseph Falaky Nagy primarily refers to when he notes the *Culhwch* "posits the existence of a lost "past" far beyond the "past" of the unfolding story."[98] The entire search for Mabon comprises "a complex of story and character that not only is said to antedate the already perhaps anterior Arthur but seemingly goes back to the beginning of time, before there were even humans."[99]

Ysbaddaden. specifies the *anoeth* in question, in reference to a previously demanded brace of hunting hounds: "*Nyt oes yn y byt kynyd a digonho kynydyaeth ar y ki hwnnw, onyt*

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[98] Nagy, "Hearing," 124.
[99] Nagy, "Hearing," 136.

Mabon mab Modron, a ducpwyt yn teir nossic y wrth y vam. Ny wys py tu y mae, na pheth yw, ae byw ae marw"[100] ("There's no huntsman in the world who can go hunting with that dog except Mabon son of Modron, who when he was three nights old, was taken from his mother. No one knows where he is, nor what is happening with him, whether he is alive or dead.") *Mabon mab Modron* means, essentially "son of the mother," though the *-on* suffix on both words has been derived from a theonymic suffix, perhaps giving "divine son of the divine mother." The narrative of an important child mysteriously snatched from his mother seems to echo the tale of Pryderi as told in the first Branch of the Mabinogi, *Pwyll Pendefig Dyfed*. Mabon himself is often linked to Maponus, attested in some Romano-British devotional materials as an Apollo-like god. However, Ronald Hutton questions this connection—"It seems impossible to prove that the medieval Mabon and Modron originated as the ancient Maponos and Matrona, and the undoubted linguistic connection of the names is a puzzle rather than a means of saying anything useful about either Roman Britain or medieval Wales."[101] While Nagy does not take quite so absolute a stance, he does note that, "The significance of the names of mother and son… was probably no longer appreciated by the time *Culhwch* was composed. Still, the otherness of Mabon is made clear in the text, if not specifically his erstwhile divinity." [102] For instance, Mabon possesses a metronymic; and the fairly transparent meaning of his name, "son of the mother," has an archetypal and archaic ring that may not have escaped medieval audiences.

Arthur assembles a crack squad to undertake the quest for Mabon, explaining to each his reasoning for their selection. "*Arthur a dywawt, 'Gwrhyr Gwalstawt Ieithoed, itti y mae iawn mynet y'r neges honn. Yr holl ieithoed yssyd gennyt, a chyfyeith wyt a'r rei o'r adar a'r*

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[100] *Culhwch*, 25-26.
[101] Hutton, *Pagan Britain*, 364.
[102] Nagy, "Hearing," 137.

aniueileit. Eidoel, itti y mae iawn mynet y geissaw, dy geuynderw yw, gyt a'm gwyr i. Kei a

Bedwyr, gobeith yw gennyf y neges yd eloch ymdanei y chaffel. Ewch im y'r neges honn."[103]

("Arthur said, "Gwrhyr Interpreter of Languages, it is good for you to go on this mission. You

have all languages, and speak the language of some of the birds and beasts. Eidoel, it is good for

you to go seek him—he's your cousin—along with my men. Kei and Bewdyr, I hope that you

will achieve the mission on which you go. Go for me on this mission.")

Gwrhyr's role as universal translator represents an age-old fantasy of transcending

Babel's divisions (one that internet translation remains enmeshed in the early stages of

attempting). But Gwrhyr goes beyond this in his access to animal communication. The text

expresses this carefully. Gwrhyr has *yr holl ieithoed*, "the entirety of [presumably human]

languages"—his possession is indicated by a common Welsh periphrastic, *yssyd gennyt*, "is with

you." But he is also *cyfyeith*, "[a speaker] of the same language," as *rei o'r adar a'r aniueileit*, "a

portion of the birds and the beasts." Animal language is still *iaith*, but it is not included in *yr holl*

ieithoed, the totality of language as a human activity, and its divisions seem less clear (at least to

Arthur.) Gwrhyr never encounters communicative problems with any of the species he addresses,

so it remains an open question why Arthur needs to suggest that Gwrhyr can converse with some

but not all creatures. Perhaps it is important, before the foray into nonhuman experience and

temporality that the text is about to take, to clarify that human access to this world is only ever

partial and contingent.

> *Kerdet a orugant racdunt hyt att Vwyalch Gilgwri. Gouyn a oruc Gwrhyr idi, 'Yr Duw, a wdost ti dim y wrth Uabon uab Modron, a ducpwyt yn teir nossic ody rwng y vam a'r paret?' Y Uwyalch a dywawt, 'Pan deuthum i yma gyntaf, eingon gof a oed yma, a minneu ederyn ieuanc oedwn. Ny wnaethpwyt gweith arnei, namyn tra uu uyg geluin arnei bob ucher. Hediw nyt oes kymmeint kneuen ohonei heb dreulaw. Dial Duw arnaf o chigleu i dim y wrth y gwr a ovynnwch chwi. Peth yssyd iawn, hagen, a dylyet ymi y*

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[103] *Culhwch*, 31.

wneuthur y gennadeu Arthur, mi a'e gwnaf. Kenedlaeth vileit yssyd gynt rithwys Duw no mi. Mi a af yn gyuarwyd ragoch yno.[104]

(They went on until they reached the Blackbird of Cilgwri. Gwrhyr asked it, "By God, do you know anything about Mabon son of Modron, who was taken when he was three nights old from between his mother and the wall?" The Blackbird said, "When first I came here, there was a blacksmith's anvil here, and I myself was a young bird. No work was done on it, except my pecking at it every evening. Today, there isn't so much as a nut's worth of it that hasn't been worn away. God's vengeance on me if I've heard anything about the man you ask about. What is good, however, and my duty to do for Arthur's messengers, I shall do. There is a kind of creature that God shaped before me. I will go on there as your guide.")

It is never explained why the emissaries begin their quest with the Blackbird of Cilgwri, or how they find it. Arthur's briefing, and Gwrhyr's involvement, have certainly suggested that the mission may involve conversing with nonhumans as well as humans, but neither gives any indication of a starting point. The text may be relying on its audience's familiarity with folkloric accounts of the Oldest Animals, other surviving examples of which often mention blackbirds (though not that of Cilgwri specifically.)[105] Since Gwrhyr does not reference the creature's age in his query, though, it is appealing to imagine that the messengers chance upon the bird quite accidentally—that the Blackbird is not intentionally sought out, but rather provides the first significant lead in their search.

The bird's reminiscence reaches back to its arrival in Cilgwri (the Wirral Peninsula, according to Bromwich and Evans)[106] as an *ederyn ieuanc*, a young bird. Its ultimate origins are irrelevant—it has become fully identified with Cilgwri, where whatever earlier wanderings it might have had came to an end. Since then, its life's work has been wearing away the (seemingly

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[104] *Culhwch*, 31.
[105] The fairly late Triad 92, *Tri Hynaif Byd* ("Three of the World's Ancient Ones), mentions *Tylluan Gwm Kowlwyd, Eryr Gwern Abwy,* and *Mwyalchen Gelli Gadarn*—the Owl of Cwm Cowlwyd, the Eagle of Gwernabwy, and the Blackbird of Celli Gadarn. Rachel Bromwich compares this to the set in *Kulwch* by noting how "the story-teller [of *Culhwch*] has with considerable artistry adapted the concept of creatures who are preternaturally long-lived in such a way as to illustrate and emphasize his rendering of the myth of *Mabon fab Modron*" (*Trioedd*, 235).
[106] *Culhwch*, 142-143.

abandoned) blacksmith's anvil, an archaeological relic implying, as the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd will soon explicitly state, the existence of prior civilizations. In its own telling, the bird's nightly activity appears pointless except insofar as it marks time. The visit of Arthur's men thus lends a purpose to the Blackbird's Sisyphean labor, making it legible as a measure of immense antiquity. Yet this immanence also suggests a troubling question – what will the Blackbird do once the anvil has fully disappeared? Will the epoch thus measured be its lifespan, or some more general unit of duration? Or—perhaps most disturbingly—will it represent nothing, other than the relentlessly erosive activity of entropy? Simply because *Culhwch ac Olwen* is not interested in these questions does not mean it is uninterested in raising them, any more than the missing realization of many of the *anoethau* do not imply their pointlessness. Rather, the text seems to continually provoke mental reflection that exceeds its own limits, particularly with regard to temporality.

Despite its single-minded isolation, the Blackbird seems to have heard of Arthur, and feels an obligation to help his men – even to the point of leaving the place it has lived nearly its whole life. The bird's allusion to where it is leading the messengers, however, is both intriguing and cryptic. "*Kenedlaeth vileit yssyd gynt rithwys Duw no mi*," ("A kind of creature there is, that God shaped before me.") *Kenedlaeth* is more usually a "kindred, nation, generation, or race," while the verb *rhithio*, "to shape, form," or even "to transform," is likewise a striking choice here. The two earliest (13th century) manuscript references for *rhithio* listed in the *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* are to the transformations in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—Jupiter into a bull, Castor and Pollux into swans—and to Uthr Bendragon's taking the shape of Gorlois to sleep with Eigyr

and so engender Arthur.[107] Furthermore, this is the verb that Ysbaddaden will use to describe the

origin of the *ychen bannawc* ("horned oxen") Nynniaw and Pebiaw, "*a rithwys Duw yn ychen am*

eu pechawd" (whom God shaped into oxen for their sinfulness").[108] Arthur will later echo this

almost exactly in providing the history of the monstrous boar Twrch Trwyth—"*Brenin uu, ac am*

y bechawt y rithwys Duw ef yn hwch" ("He was a king, and for his sinfulness God shaped him

into a pig.")[109] In these contexts, *rhithio* refers not to an originary state but to a sudden and

punitive transformation. The fact that God is the agent for all instances of the verb in *Culhwch*

may indicate that the "Oldest Animals" are to be read as metamorphosed humans.[110]

But the Blackbird's usage may alternately reference an act of creation, presenting a

theory of speciation suggestively at odds with *Genesis*. In the bird's telling, which almost

invokes twentieth-century "intelligent design" dogmas, God seems to shape successive

generations of living things (out of or from what, we are not told). These beings, differing in

type, succeed one another, but with considerable overlap in their earthly existence. The

Blackbird's version of natural history is appropriately divergent from the standard human

account. But to continue their quest, Gwrhyr and his companions must embrace it and act

according to its postulates. Only by ceding their chronological sensibility to a profoundly

different one are Arthur's heroes able to proceed.

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[107] *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, s.v. "rhithiaf," http://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html. If this meaning of
"metamorphoses" is at all intended by the animals' choice of verb, it may indicate yet another link to the story of
Tuan mac Cairill, discussed in footnote 110 below.
[108] *Culhwch*, 22.
[109] *Culhwch*, 38.
[110] This suggestion is amplified by the parallels that Eleanor Hull and Rachel Bromwich draw between the Old
Animals in *Culhwch* and tale of Tuan mac Cairill from the Irish *Lebor na h-Uidre* ("Book of the Dun Cow," early
12th c.). In this story, a man lives through all of the legendary invasions of Ireland (encompassing many centuries of
time) by reincarnating himself into a series of animals—a stag, boar, hawk, and salmon—before returning to human
form and relating all that he has seen to representatives of Christianity, newly arrived in Ireland (Eleanor Hull, "The
Hawk of Achill or the Legend of the Oldest Animals," *Folklore* 43, no. 4 (Dec. 31, 1932): 386-389; *Trioedd*, 236.)

Dyuot a orugant hyt yn lle yd oed Karw Redynure. 'Karw Redynure, yma y doetham ni attat, kennadeu Arthur, kany wdam aniueil hyn no thi. Dywet, a wdost di dim y wrth Uabon uab Modron, a ducpwyt yn deir nossic y wrth y uam?' Y Karw a dywawt, 'Pan deuthum i yma gyntaf, nyt oed namyn vn reit o bop tu y'm penn, ac nyt oed yma goet namyn un o gollen derwen, ac y tyfwys honno yn dar can keing, ac y dygwydwys y dar gwedy hynny, a hediw nyt oes namyn wystyn coch ohonei. Yr hynny hyt hediw yd wyf i yma. Ny chigleu i dim o'r neb a ouynnwch chwi. Miui hagen a uydaf gyfarwyd ywch, kanys kennadeu Arthur ywch, hyt lle y mae aniueil gynt a rithwys Duw no mi.'[111]

(They came as far as the place where the Stag of Rhedynfre was. "Stag of Rhedynfre, here we have come to you, messengers of Arthur, since we know of no animal older than you. Tell us, do you know anything about Mabon son of Modron, who was taken when he was three nights old from his mother?" The Stag said, "When first I came here, there was only one antler-tine on either side of my head, and there was no forest here, but only a single oak sapling; and it grew into an oak with a hundred branches, and the oak fell after that, and today there is nothing of it left but a red stump. From then until today I have been here. I haven't heard anything about anyone like the one you ask about. I myself, however, will be a guide for you, since you are Arthur's messengers, to the place where there is an animal that God shaped before me.")

Unlike the Blackbird, the Stag is explicitly addressed with reference to its great age. But Gwrhyr couches his query in terms that admit the limitations of his knowledge. Rather than assuming that the Stag is the oldest animal, he identifies it only as the oldest that he and his companions *know* of (the verb is a form of *gwybod*.)

The Stag describes time in terms of growth and decay. This harkens again to Goleuddydd's request at the tale's beginning, though here, wider ecologies mirror individual narratives of aging. The Stag's youthful single tines correspond to the single oak sapling. There is a wonderful implied description of the Stag's majestic appearance, its tines having spread and multiplied like the hundred branches of the oak. While the oak is now fallen and rotted away, there is a definite implication that it is the progenitor of the *coet,* the wood, that now seems to cover the area. Trees have proliferated, like the Stag's antlers, in a spare but affecting description of natural cycles. The Stag's authority on these matters, its personal experience of deep time, is

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[111] *Culhwch*, 31-32.

emphasized by its expression of what the Blackbird only implies—"*Yr hynny hyt hediw yd wyf i yma*," "From then until today I have been here."

While it substitues *aniueil,* creature in the singular, for the Blackbird's intriguing *kenedlaeth vileit*, the Stag likewise speaks of God's successive shaping. In doing so, it also subtly declares the limits of human knowledge, a theme running throughout this section but perhaps clearest here. Told that there is indeed an older animal than they knew of, Arthur's men accept this information, and continue their journey.

> *Dyuot a orugant hyt lle yd oed Cuan Cum Kawlwyt. 'Cuan Cwm Kawlwyt, yma y mae kennadeu Arthur. A wdost di dim y wrth Vabon uab Modron a ducpwyt yn teir nossic y wrth y uam?' 'Pei as gwypwn, mi a'e dywedwn. Pan deuthum i yma gyntaf, y cwm mawr a welwch glynn coet oed, ac a deuth kenedlaeth o dynyon idaw, ac y diuawyt, ac y tyuwys yr eil coet yndaw. A'r trydyd coet yw hwnn. A minneu, neut ydynt yn gynyon boneu vy esgyll. Yr hynny hyt hediw ny chiglef i dim o'r gwr a ouynnwch chwi. Mi hagen a uydaf gyuarwyd y genadeu Arthur, yny deloch hyt lle y mae yr anniueil hynaf yssyd yn y byt hwnn, a mwyaf a dreigyl, Eryr Gwern Abwy.'*[112]
>
> (They came as far as the place where the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd was. "Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd, here are Arthur's messengers. Do you know anything about Mabon son of Modron, who was taken when he was three nights old from his mother?" "What I know, I'll tell you. When first I came here, the great valley you see was a wooded glen, and a kindred of men came to it, and it was destroyed, and a second wood grew in it. And this here is the third wood. And myself, the roots of my wings are only stubs. From then until today I haven't heard anything of the man you ask about. I however will be a guide for Arthur's messengers, until you come as far as the place where there is the oldest animal in the world, and the one who has wandered most, the Eagle of Gwernabwy.")

If the Blackbird emphasized entropic disintegration, and the Stag ecological cycles, the Owl highlights periodization. *Kenedlaeth*, "kindred, nation, race," is the same word that the Blackbird used to describe the Stag of Rhedynfre, "a kind of creature that God shaped before me." But here it explicitly refers to successive generations of men. It is unclear how we are to

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[112] *Culhwch*, 32.

imagine these unnamed nations, ignorantly repeating the work of their predecessors, marking eras with their inevitable disappearances. The Owl's vision of Insular history recalls the "invasion model," by which successive and distinct tribes came to Britain or Ireland and violently overran their predecessors, imposing their culture and language on the traumatized survivors. While it became attached to nationalist and racist social Darwinist theories in the 19th century, and was not systematically debunked until the late 20th and early 21st centuries, such an account was certainly current in the Middle Ages. It appears, to varying degrees, in Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae,* the 9th century *Historia Brittonum,* Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum,* and, perhaps most explicitly, in the Irish *Lebor Gabála Érenn* ("Book of the Takings of Ireland").

But unlike these accounts, the Owl's history leaves each *kenedlaeth* nameless and inconsequential. Their only accomplishments are both negative and temporary. The verb for what happens when these men come to the woods, *diuawyt* (the verbal noun in Modern Welsh is *difa*), means "to destroy, to lay waste, to use up prodigally." While it appears here in the impersonal preterite, there is no doubt as to the link between the men's arrival and the forest's destruction. This is a rather environmentalist take on human action towards wild spaces – but it is once again in keeping with this tale's imaginative engagement with nonhuman perspectives.

The Owl retains the Stag's fundamentally cyclical vision of time, with each generation's work undone by natural forces. Only the Owl itself is truly affected by the passing ages, its wings worn down to *cynion*, "stumps" (or "carpenter's wedges.") Its age, however, has seemingly given it access the knowledge that the Blackbird and Stag did not possess—not merely of a prior creature shaped by God, but of *yr anniueil hynaf yssyd yn y byt hwnn, a mwyaf a dreigyl*, "the animal that is oldest in this world, and has wandered the most." Unlike its

predecessors, the Owl names this creature, asserting both its age and travel experience—this last in explicit contrast to the first three animals, all of whom live in near-fossilized sessility. So the messengers continue.

> *Gwrhyr a dywawt, 'Eryr Gwern Abwy, ni a doetham, gennadeu Arthur, attat y ouyn itt a wdost dim y wrth Vabon uab Modron a ducpwyt yn teir nossic y wrth y uam?' Yr Eryr a dywawt, 'Mi a deuthum yma yr ys pell o amser, a phann deuthum yma gyntaf maen a oed ym, ac y ar y benn ef y pigwn y syr bop ucher. Weithon nyt oes dyrnued yn y uchet. Yr hynny hyt hediw yd wyf i yma, ac ny chiglef i dim y wrth y gwr a ouynnwch chwi. Onyt un treigyl yd euthum y geissaw uym bwyt hyt yn Llynn Llyw, a phann deuthum i yno y lledeis uyg cryuangheu y mywn ehawc, o debygu bot vym bwyt yndaw wers vawr, ac y tynnwys ynteu ui hyt yr affwys, hyt pann uu abreid im ymdianc y gantaw. Sef a wneuthum inheu, mi a'm holl garant, mynet yg gwrys wrthaw y geissaw y dieutha. Kennadeu a yrrwys ynteu y gymot a mi, a dyuot a oruc ynteu attaf i, y diot dec tryuer a deugeint o'e geuyn. Onyt ef a wyr peth o'r hynn a geisswch chwi, ny wnn i neb a'e gwypo. Mi hagen a uydaf gyuarwyd ych hyt lle y mae.'*[113]
>
> (Gwrhyr said, "Eagle of Gwernabwy, we have come, messengers of Arthur, to you to ask if you know anything about Mabon son of Modron, who was taken when he was three nights old from his mother?" The Eagle said, "I came here in a remote time, and when first I came here I had a stone, and on its peak I would peck at the stars each night. Now it's not even a hands'-breadth in height. From then until now I have been here, and I have heard nothing of the man you ask about. But one time I went to seek my food as far as Llynn Llyw, and when I came there I struck my claws into a salmon, thinking he could be my food for a great while, and he dragged me into the depths, so far that I barely escaped from him. This is what I did, me and all my kin, we went to attack him, to try and destroy him. He sent messengers to make peace with me, and he himself came to me, to have fifty fish-spears taken from his back. If he doesn't know anything about that which you seek, I don't know anyone who would. I however will be a guide for you, as far as the place where he is.")

This time, the formula of journeying is omitted, in keeping with the Owl's direct naming of the Eagle. Confirming its immense age, the eagle prefaces the account of his arrival in Gwernabwy by noting that it was *pell o amser*, "remote in time." Its star-pecking activity sounds positively mythic, compared to the more quotidian action of the Blackbird. And whereas the

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[113] *Culhwch*, 32-33.

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Blackbird pecked directly at its anvil, the Eagle merely uses its stone as a perch. The erosive action that has worn it down is cosmic and agentless.

It is impossible to say if we are meant to understand that the Salmon of Llynn Llyw is indeed older than the Eagle (after all, we only have the Owl's word that the latter is indeed the most ancient animal.) Positioned at the end of the sequence, the Salmon may be assumed to continue and complete its pattern of movement further back in time. In the proverbs that echo the Oldest Animals sequence, described below, the Salmon often earns pride of place as the oldest creature. This specimen is apparently also giant—Kei and Gwrhyr are later able to ride "*ar dwy ysgwyd yr Ehawc*,"[114] "on the two shoulders of the Salmon," and Kei himself has already been described as an enormous man. Besides its immense size,[115] its age is indicated by the fifty spears sunk into its back, comprising a record of the pain it has endured. There is perhaps something unspeakable about the Salmon's age. And it is the Salmon who knows where Mabon is being kept, imprisoned (and perhaps tortured) in Kaerloyw (Gloucester). It leads Arthur's men there, and they are able to free the primordial prisoner.

Conducted almost entirely in dialogue, the tale of the Oldest Animals is masterfully evocative. There is a clear symmetry to the stories. The Blackbird and Eagle both describe how their daily peckings have led to a hard object being worn away, while the Stag and Owl both

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[114] *Culhwch*, 33.

[115] As mentioned above, Geoffrey of Monmouth had popularized the idea—likely present in older British folklore, since *Branwen uerch Lyr* seems quite independent from Geoffrey's opus—that the original inhabitants of the British Isles had been giants, enormous and brutal proto-humans annihilated by the superior culture of Brutus' Trojan refugees. Here, he was intervening in a debate that had been carried on by scholars including St. Augustine and Bernard of Chartres, about whether or not ancient men and creatures were larger than contemporary ones (Bath, 302). Fossil finds of prehistoric creatures, often reconstructed as giants, no doubt influenced these contentions. (The work of Adrienne Mayor—particularly *The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) and *Fossil Legends of the First Americans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005)—has emphasized the importance of early paleontological finds for myth-making in numerous premodern cultures.) Both *Branwen* and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, discussed later in this chapter, use gigantic size as one of a number of details employed to bridge mythic pre-history and historic time (see, e.g., pages 114, 121, and 1147). Indeed, it remains a popular view in the present, when fascination with sauropods, mammoths, and Megalodons obscures the fact that the modern blue whale is the largest creature that has ever lived.

measure time through the life-cycles of trees. All the animals, with the possible exception of the Salmon, speak in similar terms and embrace similar visions of the world's chronology.

In a 1932 *Folklore* article, Eleanor Hull traces the trope of a series of animals asserting their great age as far back as the Indian Buddhist Jataka tales of the fourth century CE. In the *Tittira Jataka*, a partridge, monkey, and elephant attempt to determine which of them, as the oldest, deserves the most respect. Referring to a great banyan tree nearby, the elephant claims he remembers it as a small bush; the monkey, as a mere sprout; whereas the partridge wins by asserting that he witnessed the banyan's origins as a seed planted from an earlier, primordial banyan tree (there is a strong implication here that the banyan represents the cosmos, especially as the partridge is acknowledged to be the Buddha.)[116]

The motif of the Oldest Animals is thus linked from its earliest Indian attestation to attempts to determine the age of the world (though, intriguingly, this connection seems to be missing from Latin versions of the sequence.)[117] This cosmological purpose carries through the Irish proverb Hull quotes from the early 15th century *Book of Lismore* (and alluded to by Bromwich). This saying begins by asserting that a stake (a *cuaille*, a post "put into a hedge to fill a gap") lasts a year; a field three years; a hound lives as long as three fields, a horse as long as three hounds. These multiplications of three continue through a run of other entities, thoroughly reminiscent of those evoked in *Culhwch*—human, stag, ousel (a species of blackbird), eagle, salmon, and yew, before concluding with "Three lifetimes of the yew for the world from its beginning to its end."[118] This provides a calculation for the world's lifespan of 59,049 years—a vast underestimate of the modern scientific answer (roughly 12 billion years, from the formation

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[116] Hull, "Hawk," 383-5.

[117] Michael Bath, "Donne's Anatomy of the World and the Legend of the Oldest Animals," *The Review of English Studies* New Series 32, no. 127 (Aug., 1981): 303.

[118] Hull, "Hawk," 381.

of the Earth until its absorption into the expanding Sun), but significantly longer than the biblically-derived calculations which predominated in premodern Europe. These calculations estimated Creation to have occurred roughly five and a half millennia before the birth of Christ, and, while most refrained from fixing a date for the Apocalypse, they could point to Revelations 22:20 as proof of its immanence (*dicit qui testimonium perhibet istorum. Etiam venio cito: amen. Veni, Domine Jesu*. "He that gives testimony of these things, says, Surely I come quickly: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.")

It may well be countered that most hearers of the Irish proverb would not take the time to work through the math, and would simply take the result to mean "a very long time," not presenting a doctrinal challenge to Christian cosmology. Yet as *Culhwch ac Olwen* demonstrates, it was not impossible for premodern storytellers to conceive of geological histories that differed from those in the Bible. Without making any assertions as to the truth value of these accounts—there is, as we have seen, much in *Culhwch* that is clearly not intended to be taken too seriously—the text challenges its audience to think with them.

Jon Kenneth Williams masterfully reads the Oldest Animals tale, especially the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd's testimony, as offering an inherent critique of Arthur's position as a primal hero of the British landscape and, in turn, Welsh assertions of their ancient and unbroken claim to the island. "By suggesting a tangible native history of which Arthur's retinue is unaware," he writes, "the animals identify the Arthurian polity as one that is a successor to other, prior ones."[119] This historical consciousness is tied to a recognition of transience—"the prior ages recounted by the Owl are not marked as Arthurian prehistories, as ages awaiting fulfillment in the coming of

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[119] Jon Kenneth Williams, "Sleeping with an Elephant: Wales and England in the *Mabinogion*," in *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages: Archipelago, Island, England*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 173-190 at 177.

Arthur, but instead as other, distinct times. Arthur's polity, by implication, might one day fade into memory."[120] Williams's analysis positions the animals as "aboriginal," while Arthur—seen particularly through the Owl's account of succeeding pillagers—"is nothing but another occupier" of their primordial landscape,[121] albeit one the animals seem obliged to help and respect. From this perspective, their descriptions of remote antiquity are sly subaltern jibes at the arrogance of temporal power. For Williams, this critique extends to the entire complex of British mythic history expressed in works such as *Armes Prydein*. In the words of the Oldest Animals, "[t]he Welsh origin myth…, the dream of entitlement to the whole of the island of Britain, is both neutralized and reoriented such that the fixed memory of a Welsh-speaking Britain is demoted from historical centrality and instead cast as one of many British pasts."[122] Britain, it is revealed, "was *never really* or *never only* a unified, Welsh-speaking state."[123]

Williams's analysis privileges the Owl's account of history over those of the other animals, which place much less emphasis on the transience of human nations and much more on the vastness of nonhuman time. And it remains an open question whether the purpose of such a sequence is indeed to "condition a Welsh audience to admit the political fact of Welsh political marginalization."[124] As discussed above, the dating of the text is too insecure to be sure that its original audience would have felt themselves in any need of admitting political marginalization—though it could be argued that by the time of the tale's witnesses in their 14th century manuscripts, such an outlook may have been appropriate. But by demonstrating the ways

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[120] Williams, "Sleeping," 177-178.
[121] Williams, "Sleeping," 179.
[122] Williams, "Sleeping," 180.
[123] Williams, "Sleeping," 185.
[124] Williams, "Sleeping," 176

in which *Culhwch* undermines the very myths that make up its substance, Williams echoes
Brenda Dunn-Lardeau's insistence on the subversive potential of heterochronic narrative.

By engaging with these ancient creatures and their stories, Gwrhyr, Eidoel, Kei, and
Bedwyr journey far from human knowledge and perspectives. The new accounts of the world
they hear (and, at least provisionally, accept) are all concerned with temporality. In this sense,
they can be said to embark on travel through time. After all, we still speak colloquially of a visit
to a place possessing markers of antiquity as being akin to "a trip back in time."[125] Led by their
animal guides—the word is always *cyfarwydd*, which means a guide as well as a master of
traditional lore—Arthur's emissaries are only able to find "the son of the mother" by venturing
beyond the anthropocentric, and into, as Nagy proposes, a pre-human world.

Fighting for Time

Shortly after the rescue of Mabon, *Culhwch ac Olwen* presents another inset tale, shorter
but no less evocative. And whereas the Oldest Animals expand the text's temporal boundaries
into the distant past, the story of Creiddylad ferch Llud, Gwythyr fab Greidawl, and Gwynn ap
Nudd extends them forward, to the world's end.

Creiddylad, Gwythyr, and Gwynn are all introduced in the Court List. Gwythyr in fact
appears fourth, after the preeminent champions Kei and Bedwyr, and his own father.[126]
Gwythyr's name, Bromwich points out, is cognate with the Latinate "Victor,"[127] though this does
not seem to survive into Medieval Welsh as a common noun. Gwynn ("Fair," "White," or

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[125] A casual Google search shows the phrase used to entitle travelogues to places as diverse as the Isle of Lewis,
Egypt, and Mexico.
[126] *Culhwch*, 7. This character's name, Greidawl, is glossed by Bromwich and Evans as "hot, passionate, fierce"
(*Culhwch*, 68).
[127] *Trioedd*, 395.

"Holy") surfaces shortly thereafter, third in a triad of other Gwynns. Creiddylad,[128] however, is

introduced towards the end of the list, along with a short summary of her tale, which will be told

in more detail later in the text. "*Creidylat merch Llud Law Ereint, y uorwyn uwyaf y mawred a*

uu yn Teir Ynys Prydein a'e Their Rac Ynys—ac am honno y may Gwythyr mab Greidawl a

Gwynn mab Nud yn ymlad pob dyw kalan Mei uyth hyt dyt brawt" ("Creiddylad, daughter of

Llud Silver-Hand, the noblest maiden in the Three Isles of Britain and their Three Adjacent

Isles—and for her, Gwythyr son of Greidawl and Gwynn son of Nudd are fighting every May

Day, always until Judgement Day.") Even more so than the mention of Camlan discussed earlier,

this combat hangs suspended outside chronology, its ongoing nature emphasized with the

progressive present—"*may… yn ymlad*," "are fighting"—and the redundant evocation of

eternity, "*uyth hyt dyt brawt,*" "always until Judgment Day."

Gwynn ap Nudd also appears in Ysbaddaden's listing of the *anoethau*: "*Ni heli[r] Twrch*

Trwyth nes kaffel Guynn mab Nud ar dodes Duw aryal dieuyl Annwuyn yndaw rac rewinnyaw y

bressen. Ny hebcorir ef odyno"[129] ("The Twrch Trwyth won't be hunted unless Gwynn son of

Nudd is gotten, in whom God placed the nature [or ferocity; or spirit] of the devils of Annwfn,

against the world's ruin.") The line is very difficult to interpret. "*Aryal*" is highly polysemantic,

"*Annwfn*" can be used to describe both the Christian theological Hell and a medieval Welsh

literary otherworld,[130] and "*rewinnyaw*" ('laying waste') is unconjugated, leaving the agents of

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[128] Since Edward Davies raised the suggestion in 1809, there have been efforts to equate Creiddylad (ferch Lludd) with Geoffrey of Monmouth's Cordeilla (daughter of Leir). The difficulty is that besides their names, which have a garbled similarity, and the potential status of their respective fathers as the children of shadowy ancestor-figures named Beli, there seems little to connect them – the medieval Welsh translators of Geoffrey never did. (Peter Clement Bartrum, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary: People in History and Legend up to about A.D. 1000* (Aberystwyth: Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, 1993), 165).
[129] *Culhwch*, 26-27.
[130] See pages 117-118 and notes 176-178 for further discussion of this word.

the world's potential destruction unclear.[131] It is unclear if Ysbaddaden is unaware that Gwynn is already part of Arthur's court, or if Culhwch has erred in assuming him to be. The account that follows suggests that Arthur has some authority over him, though this is not asserted until after Gwynn wreaks terrible destruction. Exactly when the inciting incident of this struggle occurs is unclear. The account of it in the text follows a scene in which Kei and Bedwyr trick and kill a giant, whose beard is one of the *anoeth*. Arthur mocks Kei for the ruse by writing a three-line satirical poem. And "*Kyn no hynny ychydic*"—"a little before that,"

> *Kyn no hynny ychydic yd aeth Creidylat uerch Lud Law Ereint gan Wythyr mab Greidawl, a chynn kyscu genthi dyuot Gwynn uab Nud a'e dwyn y treis. Kynnullaw llu o Wythyr uab Greidawl, a dyuot y ymlad a Gwynn mab Nud, a goruot o Wyn, a dala Greit mab Eri, a Glinneu eil Taran, a Gwrgwst Letlwm, a Dyfnarth y uab. A dala o Penn uab Nethawc, a Nwython, a Chyledyr Wyllt y uab, a llad Nywthon a oruc a diot y gallon, a chymhell ar Kyledyr yssu callon y dat, ac am hynny yd aeth Kyledyr yg gwyllt.[132]*
>
> (A little before that, Creiddylad daughter of Lludd Silver-Hand had gone off with Gwythyr son of Greidawl, but before their sleeping together, Gwynn son of Nudd's coming and taking her by force. Gwythyr son of Greidawl's gathering a host, and coming to fight against Gwynn son of Nudd, and Gwynn's victory. And the capturing of Greit mab Eri, and Glinneu son of Taran, and Gwrgwst Letlwm, and Dyfnarth his son. And the capturing of Penn son of Nethawc, and Nwython, and Mad Cyledyr his son; and he killed Nwython and tore out his heart, and forced Cyledyr to consume his father's heart, and from that Cyledyr went mad.)

Gwynn's motivation for this particular act of savagery is as opaque as his reason for carrying off Creiddylad. The text here shows a particular preference for unconjugated verbal nouns, which undermine agency in favor of incontrovertible occurrence. In this case, there may be echoes of a "futile battle," fought for minimal pretext and with madness resulting from the senselessness of the slaughter, as Triad 84 recalls of Arfderydd where Myrddin lost his mind.

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[131] By the early modern period, this tradition, or one like it, seemingly led to Gwynn being depicted as "*byrenin Anwn*," "king of Annwfn" - tempting Saint Collen with a court of unearthly delights within Glastonbury Tor, banished with a spritz of holy water (*Buchedd Collen. Rhyddiaith Gymraeg: Y Gyfrol Gyntaf: Detholion o Lawysgrifau, 1488-1609.* Ed. T. H. Parry-Williams. Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1988, pp. 36-40 at 39-40).
[132] *Culhwch*, 35.

Gwynn's kidnapping of Creiddylad also recalls Cilydd's violent seizure of his second wife in the tale's opening. It is also worth noting here, in contrast to certain scholarly and/or modern portrayals of Gwynn as an inherently supernatural figure, that nothing in this account lies outside the horizon of possibility for brutal tribal warfare. Only with Arthur's entry into the events does a supernatural element appear:

> *Clybot o Arthur hynny, a dyuot hyt y Gogled, a dyuynnv a oruc ef Gwynn uab Nud attaw, a gellwng y wyrda y gantaw o'e garchar, a gwneuthur tangneued y rwng Gwynn mab Nud a Gwythyr mab Greidawl. Sef tangneued a wnaethpwyt, gadu y uorwyn yn ty y that yn diuwyn o'r dwy barth, ac ymlad bob duw kalan Mei uyth hyt dyd brawt o'r dyd hwnnw allan y rwng Gwynn a Gwythyr, a'r un a orffo onadunt dyd brawt, kymeret y uorwyn.*[133]
>
> (Arthur's hearing of this, and coming up to the North, and he summoned Gwynn son of Nudd to him; and he freed those noblemen of [Gwythyr's] from [Gwynn's] prison, and the making of a truce between Gwynn son of Nudd and Gwythyr son of Greidawl. This was the truce that was made: keeping the maiden in her father's house, untouched by either side; and fighting every May Day until Judgment Day, from that day on out, between Gwynn and Gwythyr; and the one who was victorious on Judgment Day, he would take the maiden.)

Arthur's truce is really more of a curse—eternal life spent in eternal struggle for the men and eternal virginity for the woman, with a resolution only possible at the very end of time (which is, therefore, hardly a resolution at all.) All are punished, though only Gwynn's transgressions are clear in context. Gwythyr and Creiddylad seem condemned less for any particular action than for their mere participation in the love triangle.

Yet Arthur's intercession incorporates this episode into the tale's larger temporal concerns. *Culwch*, as we have seen, continually returns to questions of time's malleability, of the present's vulnerability to infiltration by other times, and of the relations between such interpenetration and the possibility or impossibility of telling stories in the first place. From the

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[133] *Culhwch,* 35.

straightforward chronology of his parents and stepparent, Culhwch travels to the court of Arthur, where figures from throughout history are present and characters may be defined by their fates at Camlan, the battle where Arthur is fated to die. Later, the journey to seek the three oldest animals marks a journey into a prehistory of nonhuman temporalities. In this context, the story of Creiddylad and her lovers is key to the development of timelessness, of feats continued and conclusions postponed until the literal end of the universe. It also functions as an inherent critique on the main action of the tale, the winning of Olwen from her monstrous father. The Creiddylad episode begins where *Culhwch* ends, with a maiden leaving her home for married life. But a violent interruption begins the story anew; sets drama in motion not just again but cyclically and eternally. By situating this combat on May Day, the tale highlights both the endless regeneration of narrative and the endless youthful desire that compels the combatants.

In a more speculative vein, the tale of Creiddylad, Gwythyr, and Gwynn can be framed as an imagining of a universe that ends in one of two exactly likely but mutually exclusive ways (either Gwythyr or Gwynn will win the combat). Such a setup suggests the possibility of alternate timelines or multiple universes. These in turn are closely linked in modern thought to the theoretical possibilities of travel through time—physicist David Deutsch has proposed that time travel is only possible if spacetime exists as a multiverse comprising infinite alternate timelines.[134] While such notions are anachronistic in reference to *Culhwch*, they are intriguing to consider in reference to a text that repeatedly demonstrates its interest in hypothetical cosmological scenarios. Alternate timelines are also related to prophecies and destinies, such as the *tynged* that instigates the tale's main action; or the doom of Camlan looming over the "Court List." By planting knowledge of the future in the past, these narrative techniques extend the ever-

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[134] Discussed in Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 157.

elusive possibility of a different choice that would remake fate. Even "prophecy avoidance"

tales, such as Oedipus, may be read as promoting free will rather than obliterating it. From such a

perspective, the characters err not in trying to avoid the prophecy, but rather in avoiding it

incorrectly—it seems obvious that they could have made choices that would have led to a

different result, and these ghostly outcomes haunt the narratives that invoke them. Gwythyr and

Gwynn's combat reverses this formula, occluding rather than revealing knowledge of the future

by declaring that only one of two equally likely outcomes will occur. The retroactive meaning

that either outcome would impose on the history of the world generates a pair of equally likely

universes. Such alternate timelines, David Wittenberg writes, enmesh reader and narrative in a

philosophical crisis:

> With neither epistemological nor ontological grounds for preferring one set of events
> over the others – because all are equally real within the story's myriad alternatives – we
> can, finally, rely only on narrative means to select at least one of them or to place them
> all in a plausible order. The ontological equivalence of several contingent possibilities
> here comes up against the necessity of positing a sufficient aesthetic reason for preferring
> one possibility over the others.[135]

Fictions that deploy alternate timelines, Wittenberg suggests, necessarily "offer 'unique

signals' for adjudicating lines of possibility, in the form of conventions of narrative structure."[136]

Does *Culhwch ac Olwen* leave such hints for the outcome of Gwynn and Gwythyr's struggle?

Imaginative modern pagan reconstructions, inspired by Robert Graves, have cast Gwynn as the

destructive force of winter and/or death, with Gwythyr as a representative of the sun, springtime,

and/or life.[137] Such fantasies, while interesting within the context of modern Paganism studies

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[135] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 22.
[136] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 24.
[137] For a particularly extended example with a refreshing pro-Gwynn stance, see
https://lornasmithers.wordpress.com/2015/04/12/gwyn-gwythyr-and-creiddylad-a-story-from-the-old-north/.

and the receptions of medieval literature, have no basis in the text of *Culhwch ac Olwen* itself,

and a reading on such terms seems unproductive—the cyclical time of the seasons is hard to

square with the teleology of Judgment Day.

But there may be other hints. Gwythyr's name ("Victor") seems almost too suggestive.

At the same time, Ysbaddaden explicitly describes *Gwynn* as entrusted by God with preventing

the world's destruction, as postponing rather than bringing about apocalypse. Then there is a tale

told shortly before the account of the war over Creiddylad:

> *A ual yd oed Gwythyr mab Greidawl dydgweith yn kerdet dros vynyd, y clywei
> leuein a gridua girat, a garwson oed eu clybot. Achub a oruc ynteu parth ac yno, ac mal
> y deuth yno dispeilaw cledyf a wnaeth, a llad y twynpath wrth y dayar, ac ev diffryt uelly
> rac y tan. Ac y dywedassant wynteu wrthaw, 'Dwc uendyth Duw a'r einym gennyt, a'r
> hynn ny allo dyn vyth y waret, ni a down y waret itt.' Hwyntwy wedy hynnt a doethant a'r
> naw hestawr llinat a nodes Yspadaden Pennkawr ar Culhwch yn uessuredic oll, heb dim
> yn eisseu ohonunt eithyr un llinhedyn, a'r morgrugyn cloff a doeth a hwnnw kynn y
> nos.*[138]
>
>   (And so it was that Gwythyr son of Greidawl one day was going over a mountain,
> and he heard wailing and grievous groaning, and it was a terrible noise to hear. He rushed
> towards it, and as he came there he drew his sword, and struck the mound to the earth,
> and so he defended them against the fire. And they themselves said to him, "Take God's
> blessing and ours with you, and that which man can never recover, we will come recover
> for you." It was they, after that, who came with the nine double-bushels of flax seed that
> Yspaddaden Chief-Giant specified for Culhwch, in full measure, with nothing missing
> from it except a single flax seed, and the lame ant came with that before night.")

As Ned Sturzer points out, the text coyly withholds the identity of the mound-dwellers

until the end of the episode, referring to them only by pronouns until the final arrival of the

morgrugyn cloff, the "lame ant." Sturzer sees Gwythyr's presence here, rather than that of

Gwrhyr Gwalstawd Ieithoed—the proven beast-whisperer of the "Oldest Animals" sequence—as

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[138] *Culhwch*, 34.

a one of "a number of subtle 'errors,'" "purposely introduced" throughout the text "to provide a sort of scavenger hunt for the more attuned members of his audience."[139]

Yet as with most arguments about medieval texts that make error a default explanation, Sturzer's proposal is unconvincing. Other characters in the tale can understand animals, and Clust fab Clusteinad's fantastic hearing is explicitly demonstrated through his ability to hear an ant "*y bore pan gychwhynnei y ar lwth*," "in the morning when it gets out of bed." By drawing his sword, Gwythyr saves the ant hill, averting a local and miniature but no less total Judgment Day. The sequence of the Oldest Animals is explicitly interested in imagining the temporalities and cosmologies of animals as separate but echoing those of humans. Furthermore, the image of Clust's ant rising from its *glwth*, its couch or bed, establishes a view of ants specifically as civilized, human-like creatures.[140] Gwythyr's victory here, achieved at swordpoint, allows the ants to survive their Judgment Day and proceed into a radically open new temporality.

It is tempting to see here a Wittenbergian "unique signal" that suggests Gwythyr's ultimate victory. Yet there is one further mention of Gwythyr and Gwynn. Near the story's conclusion, in the episode of the *Gwiddon Orddu* ("The Very Black Hag"), the two opponents appear together, offering identical council and jointly restraining Arthur from attacking the hag himself. Indeed, an overly literal reading would have them saying the same thing at the same time ("*Ac yna y dywedassant Gwynn a Gwythyr wrthaw, 'Nyt dec ac ny digrif genhym dy welet yn ymgribyaw a gwrach*."—"And then Gwynn and Gwythyr said to him, "It is neither fair nor fitting for us to see you squabbling with a sorceress.")[141] Linked by the story of their eternal combat, they are drawn together rather than forced apart, united here almost to the point of losing

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[139] Sturzer, "Purpose," 160.
[140] We might recall here Fredric Jameson's identification of science fiction's interest in "the dynamics of worlds either too large or too small to be conveyed by human language" (Jameson, "In Hyperspace," 18).
[141] *Culhwch,* 42.

individual identities. They have become fully united by their rivalry, even as its object, Creiddylad, is relegated to obscurity. There she will remain—the tale in *Culhwch* is the only medieval narrative about her.[142]

As they assimilate to one another, Gwynn and Gwythyr leave open the question of whether it is meaningful to imagine either of their victories as separate from the rival possibility. What appeared to be two timelines jockeying for reification seem to collapse into a single thread. Just as Williams reads the Oldest Animals sequence as critiquing the notion of a unitary Welsh past, perhaps the story of Gwynn and Gwythyr can be interpreted as undermining the certainty of prophetic texts such as *Armes Prydein*, in which absolute military victory of one side is both possible and morally distinguishable from its alternative. Gwynn and Gwythyr seem to accept, on the contrary, that masculine violence is an eternal and inexhaustible quantity, cyclically generating homosocial companionship and female suffering. Gwynn and Gwythyr are brought together first by their struggle over Creiddylad and then by their participation in the bloody murder of the *Gwiddon Orddu*. That this is the last of the *anoethau* highlights the theme of sexualized violence present since the tale's opening. And while the wooing or marriage tale is classically read as a constructive account of taming the wild and penetrating the unknown, *Culhwch ac Olwen* counterbalances this ostensible theme with narratives of abduction that tend

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[142] The lack of new tales about Creiddylad did not prevent those versed in traditional lore (*cyfarwyddyd*) from considering her character. *Englynion y Clyweit* ("Stanzas of the Wise") constitute seventy-three proverbs attributed to a wide variety of figures from Welsh lore. They appear in two late fourteenth or early fifteenth century manuscripts, *Jesus College 3* and the *Llyfr Coch Talgarth* (Llanstephan 27). One of these gnomic verses is ascribed to Creiddylad: "*A glyeist di a gant credeilat / uerch lud riein wastat / digawn da diwyt gennat*" ("Did you hear what Creiddylad sang, / Lludd's daughter, constant maid? / Good indeed's a devoted messenger.") Her identification here as *riein wastat*, "constant maid," closely reflects the narrative in Culhwch—specifically the description of her remaining *yn diuwyn*, 'untouched' or 'unmolested' in the house of her father. But by ascribing to her a proverb about waiting for news—any news, provided the messenger who brings it is *diwyt*, faithful, true, devoted - the anonymous compiler takes a step towards psychological speculation. Her desire for union with either of her potential mates becomes her defining characteristic. Female longing is made grounds for empathy even as it becomes a source of proverbial wisdom (Llawysgrif Llanstephan 27*, Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, Aberystwyth, 163r.)

towards the destructive. Societal bonds are undone, and the supernatural is able to cross back over the boundaries established by prior exploits. Such structures perhaps involve less a throwback to primitive source material than an advanced critique of societal fragility, and its entanglement with the same forces—erotic, irrational, generative—that it claims to supersede.

This civilizational dialectic is particularly pronounced in the final list section of the text, the hunting of the Twrch Trwyth. The boar's rampage throughout Wales can be read as a sort of re-wilding, a threatened return of the land to its (literally) uncultured, pre-human state.[143] A human king transformed into a monstrous creature of immense chaotic power, the Twrch suggests intriguing parallels with the hybrid *azhdahā* that form the subject of the next chapter of this dissertation. Like these chimeric beasts, the Twrch and his brood trouble the façade of anthropocentric time, with its insistence on teleological progression. Ultimately, however, the boars are driven from the land. Arthur's men succeed in acquiring the comb, shears, and razor from between Twrch Trwyth's ears, though not without heavy casualties.

The *anoethau* achieved, Culhwch and his companions return to Ysbaddaden's fortress for both the promised wedding and the death of the giant, which had been contingent upon his daughter's marriage. Ysbaddaden accepts this, if ungracefully. "'*Ae meu y minheu dy uerch di weithon?' 'Meu,' heb ynteu. 'Ac nyt reit itt diolwch y mi hynny, namyn diolwch y Arthur y gwr a'e peris itt. O'm bod i nys kaffut ti hi vyth. A'm heneit inheu ymadws yw y diot*"[144] ("And is your

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[143] Triad 26 contains a tradition of the pig Henwen ("Ancient White"), who traversed Wales while "farrowing" (*dotwes*) natural gifts to civilization in southern Wales—a grain of wheat, a bee, a grain of barley—and pestilential predators in the North—a wolf cub, eaglet, and a kitten who will grow into the monstrous Cath Palug ("Scratchy Cat," who may once have rivalled Mordred as a candidate for Arthur's killer). Rachel Bromwich, commenting on this, notes, "…I know of no parallel elsewhere in these for a magic animal who is depicted as a kind of 'culture-hero' and credited with the introduction of grain and bees." Bromwich notes Henwen's resemblences to the Twrch Trwyth, up to and including the reversed direction of their courses—Henwen comes from Cornwall to Wales, while Twrch Trwyth does the opposite (*Trioedd, 56*).
[144] *Culhwch*, 42.

daughter now mine?" "Yes," he said. "And you don't need to thank me for that, but rather thank Arthur, the man who brought it about for you. If I had my way, you'd never have gotten her. And as for my life, it's high time it were taken away.") In his bitter surrender, Ysbaddaden introduces a new time—*ymadws*, "high time," "the right time."[145] A tale that begins in Culhwch's invocation of untimeliness ends in an assertion of temporal propriety.

Pigpen's Purposes

Culhwch ac Olwen, with its endless catalogues, missing or abandoned threads, and drifting allusions, can seem to defy critical approaches beyond the philological (for which it is a consummate treasure trove). Yet its very abundance generates thematic through-lines that invite comprehensive analysis. Sarah Sheehan provides a thorough and convincing reading of the text as an exploration of gender issues, particularly masculinity and emasculation.[146] Joan N. Radner's "Interpreting Irony in Medieval Celtic Narrative: The Case of *Culhwch ac Olwen*" and Ned Sturzer's ambitiously titled "The Purpose of *Culhwch and Olwen*" both situate comedy and irony at the core of the text. These scholars are surely right to identify humor, and humorous inconsistency, as pervasive features of *Culhwch*. But it is hard to join them in identifying these as the "purpose" of the tale. *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Fin*, and *Angels in America* are all suffused with humor and contradiction—but no one would identify these features as the "purpose" of any of these classics. Nor, for that matter, would most critics attempt to identify a singular authorial aim for them.

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[145] The editors of the *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* tentatively link it to Latin *mātūrus*, "ripe," which offers suggestive resonances in light of the vegetative imagery of time throughout the tale—not least because *ysbyddad* means "hawthorn, thorn bush" (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, s.v. "ymadws," http://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html).

[146] Sarah Sheehan, "Giants, Boar-hunts, and Barbering: Masculinity in "Culhwch ac Olwen," *Arthuriana* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 3-25.

Culhwch ac Olwen comprises an impressively dense number of threads, themes, and references in a its short span. Yet among these is undoubtedly an interest in time and its effects; its pervasiveness and porousness. In Goleuddydd's request, Ysbaddaden's first *anoeth*, and some of the reminscences of the Oldest Animals, time is measured by natural growth; in the combat of Gwynn and Gwythyr, the other memories of the Oldest Animals, and the Twrch Trwyth's rampage across British lands, it is a record of entropy, whether gradual disintegration or willful destruction. Occasionally, it is both, as in the Stag of Rhedynfre's description of a tree's life cycle and its mirroring of his own.

Helen Fulton notes that while agentive magic and the agentless supernatural both suffuse *Culhwch ac Olwen*, the latter dominates the text. This force "exists immanently in the natural world and as an intrinsic quality of certain individuals, whether they want it or not."[147] Fulton identifies it as akin to the medieval category of *mirabilia*, which Gervase of Tilbury defined as "phenomena which are natural but cannot be explained (because they lack agency)." In this world, all figures, heroes and villainous creatures alike, "inhabit a similar world of physical peculiarity that is close to being monstrous." [148] Fulton claims that the text seems to lack "a distinctive otherworld," or at least makes "no clear distinction" between a real and otherworld – perhaps, she posits, because "Arthur's world is already an otherworld."[149] The above analysis, however, suggests that the text proposes neither *an* otherworld,[150] nor an undifferentiated blending of ontologies, but rather a whole set of *other worlds*—thought experiments on the cosmological temporalities of different beings, human, semihuman, and nonhuman.

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[147] Fulton, "Magic," 12.
[148] Fulton, "Magic," 13.
[149] Fulton, "Magic and the Supernatural," 15.
[150] The concept of the otherworld is discussed both below in the section on *Branwen* (see pages 117-118 and 127-128) and more fully in the Introduction to Chapter III (see pages 386-392); see also the discussions of Avalon and similar realms on 458-462 and 484-486.

These imaginative scenarios present themselves as a range of possible hermeneutic approaches to the text. In a world doomed to bloodshed and misogyny, which will end in the meaningless victory of one of two identical barbarians, *Culhwch ac Olwen* offers an exhausting deferral, but no escape from, the fated destruction of Camlan. The steady decimation of Arthur's warband, particularly in the hunting of the Twrch Trwyth, mirrors the role played by the Grail Quest in later literature with none of the transcendence. And Ysbaddaden, his death set in motion by generational change (his daughter's marriage) is a grotesque presage of Arthur, *le roi fainéant*, immense and helpless before time.

But in a universe far older and wider than human comprehension, the horizon of possibility is always waiting to be opened. Certain apocalypse can be averted by an attentive and compassionate hiker; time's tyranny can be reconsidered or altered entirely. In every wood leveled by the senseless destruction of this generation, there is another forest latent.

Though it ostensibly depicts Britain's past, *Culhwch ac Olwen* explodes the temporal boundaries that distinguish that past from successive eras. By undermining the stability of sequential relations between history and present, it provokes reflection on a diverse range of chronologies, unconfined by normative accounts of temporality. In the experimental space of its myriad time-bending episodes, this story of a quest for a giant's daughter comes to question not only the teleology of that quest but of any search for meaning that locates its ends in ever-receding origins or ever-postponed days of judgment.

2. Bridging Temporalities in *Branwen ferch Llŷr*

A giant king of Britain gives his sister in marriage to a king of Ireland. Included in the dowry is an ancient cauldron, capable of restoring slain warriors to life. But the Irish mistreat

their British queen, and prevent her from communicating with her brother. She trains a starling to bear him a message; he raises an army and wades across the sea to Ireland. A treacherous Irish ambush results in bloody slaughter, with the Irish using the cauldron to revive their dead until a British renegade sacrifices himself to destroy it. Despite this heroic act, however, the giant king is mortally wounded and only seven of his warriors left alive. He commands these to cut off his head and bear it with them back to Britain, where a new king has usurped the throne. Along the way, the giant's sister dies of grief, seeing herself as the cause of the bloodshed; the seven warriors, meanwhile, spend timeless decades feasting. They forget their sorrows while the deathless head entertains them. But at last time catches up to them. In mourning, they trek to London, and bury their king's head there as a protective talisman for the island.

Branwen ferch Llŷr is the second of the *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi*,[151] the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. It follows *Pwyll Pendefic Dyfed* and precedes *Manawydan fab Llŷr*, and is linked to the latter by a direct narrative transition that is unique amongst the Four Branches.[152]

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[151] While the individual branches do refer to themselves as *keinc* of the *Mabinogi*, the notion that they comprise a complete set of four is nowhere mentioned in the original texts, and so *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi* is to some degree a modern formulation. While there is nothing to suggest that additional branches ever existed, and various structural features can be detected that make the *Pedair Cainc* a balanced and complete set, nothing in the beginning of *Pwyll* or the end of *Math* definitively precludes the possibility of additional branches. The more widely-known term *Mabinogion*, by contrast, is definitively modern, resulting from a mistaken antiquarian reading of a scribal error as the plural of *mabinogi* (a term that itself probably originally meant "[stories about] a hero's boyhood deeds," though in the context of the *Pedair Cainc* seems to have developed a more general sense of "legends, old tales"). *Mabinogion* was adopted by Lady Charlotte Guest as the title for her collection of translations from medieval Welsh to English. First published between 1838 and 1845, these comprise the *Pedair Cainc* alongside five "native tales" (*Culhwch ac Olwen*, *Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig*, *Lludd a Llefelys*, *Hanes Taliesin,* and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, the subject of the next section of this dissertation) and three "romances" related to the works of Chrétien de Troyes (*Iarlles y Ffynnon*, *Gereint ac Enid*, and *Peredur fab Efrog*.) Minus *Hanes Taliesin*, this set of eleven tales became the "standard set" of the *Mabinogion*, and has appeared together as such in virtual all major translations of the corpus.

[152] While these links are only the most explicit of the connections between *Branwen* and the other branches, in this analysis I treat *Branwen* largely in isolation from the remainder of the *Mabinogi*. In doing so, there is perhaps a risk of atomizing the *Pedair Cainc*, which in their extant form seem intended to be read as a single, comprehensive work. Yet since the exact nature of this single work is unlikely to ever be determined comprehensively, extracting a single branch for analysis can be compared to performing a close reading on a single poem from a collection – with an awareness that the part contributes to the whole, and the whole enforces itself, sporadically, upon the particular workings of the part.

The *Pedair Cainc*, like *Culhwch ac Olwen*, are preserved in both *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* (The White Book of Rhydderch, completed c. 1300-1325) and *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (The Red Book of Hergest, completed c. 1375-1425),[153] together with a fragment in Peniarth 6 (13th century).

The dating of the text itself is somewhat more contentious. After summarizing the arguments of Sir Ifor Williams, who posited a date of c. 1060, and Saunders Lewis, who argued for 1170-1190, T. M. Charles-Edwards concludes that it is "likely that the Four Branches belong to sometime between 1050 and about 1120."[154]

There are certainly instances in the other Branches of the *Mabinogi* in which time is experienced uncannily – as in *Pwyll Pendefig Dyfed,* when riders attempting to reach Rhiannon, gently cantering on her horse, find themselves no closer to her no matter how hard they spur. But *Branwen* is unique in its foregrounding of time's weirding effects. While *Branwen* features no explicit journeys into the past, its characters continually struggle against time, seeking to resist or reverse its effects. They recover ancient artifacts, challenge the finality of death, and strive to relegate time's passage to pure subjectivity. The narration, while staging these fractious encounters amongst ephemeral flesh, receding history, and onrushing future, itself wrestles with both longing and revulsion towards the lost antiquity it depicts. Like *Culhwch ac Olwen*, it both

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[153] Sullivan, *Mabinogi,* xv.

[154] T. M. Charles-Edwards, "The Date of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi," in *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, ed. C. W. Sullivan III, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), (53). Charles-Edwards arrives at this by noting that the verbal system of the texts provides a *terminus ante quem* of the early eleventh century, while certain morphological forms, the paucity of French lexical borrowings, and the "archaic form of society depicted" seem to provide a *terminus post quem* of the early twelfth century (Charles-Edwards, "Date," 44.) More specifically, Charles-Edwards notes two details from *Branwen* that seem to narrow the date further—the fact that Matholwch, the King of Ireland, is depicted as coming to Wales from the South, and the invocation of an Irish custom for the submission of one king to another by which the subordinate entered the house of the superior. The former indicates a date before 1120; the latter, after 1050. It should be noted that Charles-Edwards' logic on both counts is thoroughly challenged by Patrick Sims-Williams (Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence,* 189-191), but Sims-Williams does not go so far as to propose an alternate dating scheme. The temporal telescoping employed in such debates, it might be noted, performs its own heterochronic work.

depicts a British past (or rather, an assemblage of competing pasts) and undermines the temporal relation of those histories to any legible present.

Points of Origination

The simultaneous pressure of different eras is detectible even in the names of the story's primary characters. Branwen's name and that of her giant brother Bendigeidfran have transparently related meanings—"White Raven" and "Blessed Raven," respectively. Some commentators have suggested that Branwen was originally Bronwen, "White Breast"—a spelling which occurs once in the tale and in some allusions to it—and that her name was mistakenly assimilated to that of her brother.[155] But as in other cases, this fixation on ultimately unknowable origins prevents an insightful discussion of the text as it stands. The author or redactor of the Second Branch opted to make the tale's heroine a White Raven, and pair her with her brother's equally evocative name.[156]

As with the royal sibling's half-brothers, Efnisien ("hostile") and Nisien ("peaceful"),[157] these epithets recall the essentialized qualities and folkloric atmosphere of the Court List in *Culhwch ac Olwen.* This air of storied tradition has led to a persistent antiquarian interest in

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[155] Davies, *Mabinogion*, 233.

[156] Patrick K. Ford notes that *gwen/gwyn*, "white," often has connotations of "holy" and so is in some sense equivalent to *bendigeid*. The siblings' names are thus perhaps "one and the same name, the latter reflecting the later and borrowed word for "holy," etc., the former representing a purely native development" (Patrick K. Ford, "Branwen: A Study of the Celtic Affinities," in *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, ed. C. W. Sullivan III (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 105). As discussed on this page, Bendigeidfran is the sibling more frequently singled out for treatment as a "native" British deity, so it is hard to see strong correlations between the etymological facts and the qualities of the characters. Yet as a doublet expressing variations on a theme, Bendigeidfran and Branwen perhaps provide an example of "old" and "new" (or at least, "Welsh/native" and "Latinate/foreign") coexisting within the same narrative space.

[157] Natasha Sumner, drawing on W. J. Gruffydd, Ifor Williams, and Patrick Ford, notes that Efnisien's name is based on the adjective *efnys*, "hostile, wrathful," which, since *ef-* (*af-*) is a negative prefix, implies an opposite *nys,* presumably meaning 'peaceful, conciliatory" (Natasha Sumner, "Efnisien's Trickster Wiles: Meanings, Motives, and Mental Illness in the Second Branch of the *Mabinogi*," *Studia Celtica Posnaniensia* 1, no. 1 (2016): 78-79).

establishing divine origins for Bendigeidfran. Rachel Bromwich claims that "The portrayal of *Brân Fendigaid* in *Mabinogi Branwen* suggests that he is a euhemerized deity," citing his immense size, his wading across the Irish Sea, and a scene in which he lays across the river Llinon[158] to serve as a bridge for his warriors. Bromwich further notes the meaning of Bran's name (while also pointing out that this occurs from an early date as both a personal name and a poetic epithet for a warrior), and the derivation of *Bendigeid* from Latin *benedictus*, "blessed."[159] The difficulty, as with many other equations of medieval Welsh characters with Iron Age deities, is the lack of evidence for the worship of a god called Bran or anything like it, let alone one whose qualities mirror those depicted in the *Pedair Cainc*. However, one of the leading proponents of this skeptical view, Ronald Hutton does acknowledge the trans-temporal importance of ravens. "These scavenging and carrion-eating birds," he writes, "associated with death and war but also daily cleaners at human settlements, retained symbolic potency"[160] from British prehistory through to the Victorian myth of the Tower Ravens.[161]

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[158] Identified by modern scholars with *An Life*, the Liffey. The derivation is summarized in Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence*, 197-198.

[159] *Trioedd*, 290. Glenys Goetinck sees in Bendigeidfran an instance of a "Blessed Hero," an archetype also represented by the other traditional bearers of the epithet *bendigeid*, Gwrthefyr (Vortimer) and Cadwaladr. She proposes that ninth century ecclesiastics, "[b]lending ancient legend and historical tradition, … evolved the story of the Christian hero who, beset by treachery from his own countrymen and the enemy from across the sea, battled valiantly to save his country from defeat. Thanks to his miraculous powers, he could have protexted the island even after death but was prevented from doing so by the pride or heedlessness of his successors." Such accounts "would help to rationalize the defeat of the British by the Saxons" while also making clear British claims on London, where all three are (in some versions) said to be interred (Goetinck, "Blessed," 103-105). The numerous parallels between the stories of Bendigeidfran and Gwrthefyr, at least, suggest that one may have been imagined on the model of the other. On this question, though, Bendigeidfran's alleged mythic qualities, and earlier position in British legendary history, should not obscure the fact that he first appears in sources at a considerably later date than Gwrthefyr.

[160] Hutton, *Pagan Britain*, 254.

[161] The definitive study is Boria Sax's *City of Ravens: The Extraordinary History of London, the Tower, and its Famous Ravens* (London; New York: Duckworth Overlook, 2011), though he summarizes his main argument regarding the creatures' fundamental origins in "The Tower Ravens: Invented Tradition, Fakelore, or Modern Myth?" (*Storytelling, Self, Society* 6, no. 3 (September-December 2010): 231-240). The fundamental points are that the ravens arrived at the Tower around 1883, partly to add a Gothic touch to the tales of ghosts and executions relished by the Yeomen Warders, partly as a Neo-Celtic spiritual exercise by the Earls of Dunraven, who helped popularize the notion of Bran (Bendigeidfran) as a raven-god (233). Bran was authentically linked to the Tower of London, as discussed below. As for the Tower ravens, Sax concludes, "What visitors to the Tower experience is a genuine Victorian fantasy of Tudor England, which, in turn, was pervaded by nostalgia for the Middle Ages" (235).

Thus however much the extant text of *Branwen* draws on pre-existing legends – which it may do almost entirely, or barely at all – the corvine connections of its central characters' names would have been immediately obvious to its audience. While it is not clear that these links are meant to structure understandings of the narrative, ravens are unavoidably laden with symbolic potential. The birds feature prominently throughout the Bible, in which they are proverbial for failing Noah on the Ark (Genesis 8:6-7) and feeding Elijah in the desert (1 Kings 17:4-6).[162] Their necrophagy and ominous croaks have appalled human onlookers as long as their graceful soaring, glossy blue-black feathers, and close pair bonding have inspired them. Impressively intelligent yet capable of savagery, they evoke familiar human qualities while remaining defiantly other. In this deep ambivalence, it is tempting to locate an analogy to the medieval storyteller's views on the pre-Christian past generally.

Thus Bendigeidfran and his sister are invested from the moment of their introduction with an antique alterity that seems to demand interpretation. But the narrative never provides such a gloss, never explicitly clarifies what "white" has to do with Branwen, "blessed" with her brother, or "raven" with either of them. As with many other details in the text, these names seem to be awaiting a significance that never quite surfaces.

This latent quality defines the opening scene of *Branwen*, which twice establishes that Bendigeidfran and his court are sitting (*yn eisted*) above the sea at Harlech, and twice notes that they see (*welynt/welaf*) ships approaching from Ireland. Not until some twenty lines into the tale

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[162] In fact, Biblical ravens cover an impressively wide spectrum of allusive possibility – they are symbols of desolation (Zephaniah 2:14, Isaiah 34:11); sinister eye-peckers of those who scorn their parents (Proverbs 30:17); and poetic metaphors for beauty, compared to the bridegroom's hair in the Song of Songs 5:11. The single New Testament reference conveys notions of divine sustenance—Luke 12:24, directly echoing Psalm 147:9: "Consider the ravens, for they sow not, neither do they reap, neither have they storehouse nor barn, and God feeds them." Another Semitic resonance, somewhat later, is the *ghurāb al-bayn*, "the crow of separation," which croaks the decree of destiny in the classical Arabic *qaṣīda* tradition.

do any of the Welsh characters *move*.[163] Catherine McKenna describes this as "very nearly cinematic in its effect"[164] while also noting an anxiety of marginalization that subtly threatens the orderly stasis of the *mise-en-scène.* Though Bendigeidfran is introduced as "*[b]renhin coronawc ar yr ynys hon, ac ardyrchawc o goron Lundein*" ("crowned king of this Island, and invested with the crown of London"), the invocation of London in juxtaposition with Harlech, virtually the entire breadth of the island away, immediately suggests a dislocation.[165] Perched on the rock of Harlech, the primordial Bendigeidfran and his court seem to be waiting for something— history, narrative, time—to begin.

The appearance of the Irish King Matholwch and his fleet set these forces in motion. When asked why their king has come, the Irish answer, "*Y erchi Branwen uerch Llyr y doeth, ac os da genhyt ti, ef a uyn ymrwymaw Ynys y Kedeirn ac Iwerdon y gyt, ual y bydynt gadarnach*"[166] ("To seek Branwen daughter of Llŷr the Wise, and if it pleases you, he wishes to bind the Isle of the Mighty and Ireland together, that they might be mightier.") Matholwch's embassy promises that *ymrwymaw*, "binding together, uniting," will make Britain—*Ynys y Kedeirn*, Isle of the Mighty—mightier (*gadarnach*), literally more like itself. Joining with a foreign polity will substantiate rather than dilute its identity.

This belief, that connection and intercommunication will lead to a better future, that the originary moment is not located in atavistic isolation but in a union yet-to-come, is raised in *Branwen* only to be brutally shattered by the events that follow. A tale that begins with an offer to forge close ties with a neighboring country ends with the planting of a talismanic skull to

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[163] Derick S. Thomson, ed., *Branwen uerch Lyr*: *The Second of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi edited from the White Book of Rhydderch with variants from the Red Book of Hergest and from Peniarth 6* (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1961), 1.
[164] McKenna, "Colonization," 112.
[165] McKenna, "Colonization," 114.
[166] *Branwen*, 2.

defend Britain's shores from any foreign incursion, echoing the xenophobia that animates *Armes Prydein*. Yet again and again, the text refuses to give in to stark nativist pessimism. Its heroes are consistently those who strive for connection across time and space—who, like Bendigeidfran, literally make themselves bridges. These efforts may be doomed, but they stand out all the more brilliantly against the chaos towards which even the best intentions slide inexorably.

Cauldron Born(e)

Chaos claims its stake as a potent political force when Bendigeidfran's half-brother Efnisien learns that Branwen has been promised to Matholwch. Furious that he has not been consulted, Efnisien horrifically mutilates Matholwch's horseherds. The Irish, appalled, prepare to leave, and Bendigeidfran is only just able to convince them of his ongoing good will. To make good the insult, the British king makes a fateful offer—"*Mi a delediwaf dy iawn heuyt yt,' heb y Bendigeituran. 'Mi a rodaf yt peir, a chynnedyf y peir yw, y gwr a lader hediw yt, y uwrw yn y peir, ac erbyn auory y uot yn gystal ac y bu oreu, eithyr na byd llyuerfyd ganthaw*"[167] ("I will improve your compensation further," said Bendigeidfran. "I will give you a cauldron, and the quality of this cauldron is, a man of yours who is slain today, throw him in the cauldron, and before tomorrow he will be as good as he ever was, except he will not be able to speak.")

It is noteworthy that the cauldron (later referred to as the *peir dadeni*, "cauldron of rebirth"[168]) does not simply restore the dead to life—rather, it resurrects those who have been

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[167] *Branwen*, 5-6.

[168] *Branwen*, 14. Patrick Sims-Williams suggests that the link between "cauldron" and "creation" may have deep etymological roots in Celtic languages (Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence*, 234). The word *dadeni* presents Mac Cana with some difficulty—not least of which is that "rebirth" hardly seems an accurate description for the resuscitation of fully-grown armed warriors. (Here he makes a suggestion that Patrick K. Ford fleshes out in his riposte to Mac Cana's monograph—that this quality of the cauldron recalls the bizarre reproduction of Cymidei Cymeinfoll and Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid (Ford, "Branwen," 109-110; Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr: A Study of the Irish Affinities and of the Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), 62). Etymologically, Mac Cana notes, the *dad-* prefix can signify both negation and repetition. While this

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killed or struck down (*lader*). It participates purely in an economy of war; in peacetime, its powers lie latent. As such, it seems to represent a uniquely ill-omened choice for a peace offering, presaging as it does the slaughter that is to come. Yet by undoing death's finality, the cauldron also expresses a dream of return to an irrecoverable yesterday, an unweaving of causality that hopes for renewed opportunity.

Death still leaves its mark, however, in the silence of the cauldron-born. The uncanniness of these undead is understated at this point in the tale, though it surges powerfully into view during the final battle in Ireland, when the Irish ranks become increasingly filled with unspeaking ghouls. Where *Branwen* derived this evocative detail remains unclear. Proinsias Mac Cana, whose study of *Branwen* relies heavily on parallels to Irish tradition, essentially admits defeat on this point, ultimately offering the somewhat far-fetched suggestion that the writer of Branwen "came to associate speech with severed heads and resuscitation with whole bodies."[169] Aled Llion Jones, on the other hand, reads the silence of the resuscitated warriors as connected to the Otherworld, from which they have presumably returned.[170] Unable to speak, the former corpses are thus unable to convey their experiences of death and afterlife. The strangeness of their temporal journeys must remain unnarrated.

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particular usage of *dadeni* may be an innovation by the author of *Branwen*, it parallels the more expansive usages of the Irish equivalent *aithgein*. So Mac Cana concludes his account of the difficulties of the cauldron—"The writer, having wedded the resuscitation theme to the Otherworld cauldron, chose to designate the latter by the word *dadeni* in its secondary sense of renewal" (Mac Cana, *Branwen,* 63-64).

[169] Mac Cana, *Branwen,* 95. Noting that the *peir*'s magic quality stands in stark contrast to most Irish otherworldly cauldrons, which are vessels of abundance and extraordinary hospitality, Mac Cana does connect it tentatively to a scene in the Irish *Cath Maige Tuired* ("The Battle of Moytura"), in which the dead of the Tuatha Dé Danann are cast into an enchanted well named Sláine (Health), which returns them to life (Mac Cana, *Branwen,* 54).

[170] Jones, *Darogan*, 70. In the *Llyfr Taliesin*'s poetic account of Arthur's expedition to a shadow hellscape, "Preiddeu Annwn," there is a statement that though "*tri vgeint canhwr a seui ar y mur / oed anhawd ymadrawd a'e gwylyadur*" ("six thousand men were standing on its wall / it was hard to communicate with their watchman.") (Marged Haycock, ed. and trans, *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin* (Aberystwyth: CMCS Publications, 2015), 436.)

As it transpires, Matholwch is familiar with the cauldron. It in fact originates in Ireland; and the Irish king was present when it surfaced from the loch where it had been hidden. As Matholwch tells Bendigeidfran, in the course of their reconciliation feast:

> *Yn hela yd oedwn yn Iwerdon dydgueith ar benn go[r]ssed uch penn llyn oed yn Iwerdon, a Llyn y Peir y gelwit. A mi a welwn gwr melyngoch mawr, yn dyuot o'r llyn, a pheir ar y geuyn. A gwr heuyt athrugar mawr, a drygweith anorles arnaw oed; a gwreic yn y ol; ac ot oed uawr ef, mwy dwyweith oed y wreic noc ef.*[171]
> (I was hunting in Ireland one day, on top of the mount which rises above a lake that's in Ireland, and they call it 'Lake of the Cauldron.' And I saw a big man with yellow-red hair, coming from the lake, and a cauldron on his back. And he was a big, monstrous man, and he had an evil, hostile look about him; and a woman following him; and if he was big, the woman was more than twice as big as him.)

This man, Llassar Llaes Gyfnewit, introduces himself to Matholwch by explaining the unusual reproductive habits of his wife, Cymidei Cymeinfoll—"*y wreic honn… ym penn pethewnos a mis, y byd beichogi idi, a'r mab a aner yna o'r torllwyth hwnnw, ar benn y pethewnos a'r mi, y byd gwr ymlad llawn aruawc*"[172] ("this woman, at the end of six weeks, will become pregnant, and the boy then born from that pregnancy at the end of six weeks, will be a fully-armed fighting man.") The bizarre temporality that operates within Cymidei's body marks her as monstrous, perhaps more so than the giant size she shares with the heroic Bendigeidfran.

Note that the lake seems to be called "Lake of the Cauldron" from well before Llassar emerges from its depths, bearing the eponymous object. Like Bendigeidfran at the start of the text, the lake has seemingly been waiting for an inciting event, the rupture that reifies its name. With Llassar's appearance, its onomastics are suddenly and dramatically brought to life. Origins surge up from the water and assert themselves into contemporary struggles over sovereignty.

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[171] *Branwen*, 6.
[172] *Branwen*, 6.

Mac Cana claims that the cauldron is a "symbol[] of the Otherworld."[173] A lake being a common gateway to this realm, he claims, it was a natural choice for the storyteller to select as the cauldron's place of origin once he had settled on an inland scene; the other option would have been from "under hills."[174] In the matter of the cauldron—as later, we shall see, in the matter of the sojourn in Gwales—Mac Cana's arguments are undermined by his unproblematized reliance on a pan-Celtic, amorphously pre-Christian idea of the "Otherworld." There is no equivalent word in medieval Welsh.[175] The closest match is perhaps Annwfn, the "In-world," or "terrible interior,"[176] a mysterious polity that interacts with the Welsh principality of Dyfed in several Branches of the *Mabinogi*, but is never mentioned in *Branwen*. The Irish *síd*, the ancient burial mounds that house the magic-wielding Tuatha Dé Danann, are rarely if ever depicted as forming a single continuous realm in opposition to the human world,[177] and certainly are never

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[173] Mac Cana, *Branwen,* 46.

[174] Mac Cana, *Branwen,* 42. See pages 433-435 for a hill as an otherworldly passage in Marie de France's *Yonec*.

[175] Patrick Sims-Williams, "Some Celtic Otherworld Terms," in *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture: A Festschrift for Eric P. Hamp,* ed. A. T. E. Matonis and Daniel F. Melia (Van Nuys, CA: Ford & Bailie, 1990), pp 57-84 at 60;

[176] Based on etymologies given in *Culhwch*, 135, and R. L. Thomson, ed., *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet* (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), 25-6. These propose *dwfn* 'world' and a prefix *an-* meaning 'in,' giving "the inner world." Thomson also offers *an-* as an intensifier + *dwuyn*, that is, "fearfully deep." Patrick Sims-Williams adds the possibility of "Not-World," without especially endorsing it (Sims-Williams, "Celtic Otherworld," 62; *Irish Influence,* 57-58.). In *Pwyll*, Annwfn seems to spatially coincide with at least some parts of Dyfed; poetic references often locate it underground, though in "Preiddeu Annwn," it seems to lie beyond a wide body of water.

[177] The opening lines of *Mesca Ulad* are a possible exception—"*Ó do-ríachtatar Meic Míled Espáine Hérind tánic a ngáes timchell Túathi Dé Danann. Cu ru léiced Hériu ar raind Amairgin Glúnmáir meic Míled… Cu ru raind Hérinn dar dó 7 co tuc in leth ro boí sís d'Hérind do Thúaith Dé Danann et in leth aile do Maccaib Míled Espáine da chorpfhini fadéin. Do-chuatar Túath Dé Danann i cnoccaib 7 sídbrugib cu ra accallset sída fo thalmain dóib*" ("When the Sons of Mil Espáne reached Ireland, they outwitted the Túatha Dé Danann. So Ireland was left to Amergin Glúnmár son of Mil for dividing… So he divided Ireland in two, and gave the side that was below Ireland to the Túatha Dé Danann and the other side to the Sons of Mil Espáne, his own kin by blood. The Túatha Dé Danann went into the hills and the region of the *síd*, and so the *síd* under the ground submitted to them") (J. Carmichael Watson, ed., *Mesca Ulad* (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), 1). Patrick Sims-Williams contrasts the "single realm" (albeit politically contested) of Annwfn with the numerous "independent kingdoms" of the *síde*, analogizing these to the political situations of Wales and Ireland respectively and doubting any medieval Irish conception of a singular "Otherworld" (Sims-Williams, "Celtic Otherworld," 63 and 67; *Irish Influence*, 59.)

conceived as connecting all the supernatural spaces of the North Atlantic archipelago into one uncanny confederation.[178]

Given the complications of treating the cauldron as a product of some unnamed sublacustrine otherworld, it may be at least as productive to see it as an object from the past. Patrick Sims-Williams, alluding to Miranda Aldhouse-Green and Venceslas Kruta and citing examples including the famous Gundestrup Cauldron, comments on how the transnational travels of the *peir* "lend the story an air of antiquity when they are considered in the light of ancient trade and gift exchange."[179] Ronald Hutton comments on the archaeological prevalence of cauldron deposits "in bogs and pools" throughout Britain and Ireland, noting that these are particularly common in deposits from later than 100 BCE[180]—which would have been more readily accessible than older hoards to medieval treasure hunters. Hutton summarizes Aldhouse-Green's account of cauldrons as elemental crucibles of life and death, though he concludes on a characteristically skeptical note—"The problem is that cauldrons were prestige objects in the early Middle Ages as well as in prehistory, and that their connotations in medieval myth and legend may not have been the same as those in the earlier period."[181]

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[178] Welsh and Irish non-human realms remain distinct in medieval sources, notwithstanding some intriguing points of conceptual correspondence and a few examples of borrowing, such as the reference to "*kaer sidi*" in the Welsh poem *Preiddeu Annwn* (discussed by Sims-Williams, "Celtic Otherworld," 69-75, and *Irish Influence*, 66-78, who argues that it remained a learned, obscure, and minor term in Welsh considerations of otherworlds). Writing on the two meanings of *síd* ("Otherworld [hill or mound]" and "peace"), Tomás Ó Cathasaigh points out that the proverbial peace overseen by great kings is linked to their rule being sanctioned by beings from the *síd*. "The Golden Age is separated in time, the Otherworld in space from the storyteller and his audience: they are different responses to the yearning for an ideal world… The state of peace secured by the kings of the mythic past, whose kingship was sanctioned by the Otherworld, is seen as a re-creation in this world of the paradisal condition" (Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Semantics of 'Síd,'" *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies* XVII, no. 2 (Winter 1977-78): 144). He goes on to adduce a similar equivalence in Welsh, with reference to the opening events of *Pwyll Pendefig Dyfed*. In *Branwen*, however, the relationship between otherworldly favor and sovereign stability is far less clear; if anything, interlopers (whether from abroad or from the chthonic interior) are destabilizing forces, which may be neutralized by a capable king (as in Bendigeidfran's ability to make use of Llasar and his kindred) but whose malignant influence (in this case, the cauldron) is more difficult to eradicate.
[179] Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence*, 233.
[180] Hutton, *Pagan Britain,* 183.
[181] Hutton, *Pagan Britain,* 369. For instance, the cauldron's symbolic role in providing sustenance may link it to notions of royal hospitality and sovereignty.

In a volume produced to commemorate the discovery of the Lindow Man (an Iron Age body naturally mummified in a Cheshire peat bog), R. C. Turner notes that four metallic vessels recovered from Iron Age Wales—two bronze cauldrons from Llyn Fawr, a bronze bucket from Arthog, and a bowl with gold inlay from Caergwle—all originate in peat deposits. He then makes the intriguing link to *Branwen* by noting that Llasar's hair is said to be *melyngoch* (yellow-red), "commonly reported as the colour of bogmen's hair from staining by the peat-water."[182] While this connection is entirely speculative, it is almost certain that medieval people would have encountered bog bodies in the course of peat-harvesting and other activities. Profoundly strange yet eerily life-like in appearance, these corpses and any objects associated with them may, like other enigmatic relics of the past, have provoked rich narrative speculation.

Reading the archaeological ghost stories of M. R. James, Carolyn Dinshaw describes how "the past is powerfully present in objects, and he who meddles with them can certainly come to regret doing so; the past is best left lost and obscure, lest its inexplicable and boundless malignity be loosed. Technologies of recovery… be damned."[183] It is certainly possible to understand the *peir dadeni* similarly, as an object so embedded in pastness that any attempt to re-introduce it into contemporary life is doomed. Alternately, like Tolkien's ring (or Lloyd Alexander's Black Cauldron, directly inspired by the *peir*), it is an ancestral relic whose powers incline towards evil, since fallen human weakness is ultimately unsuited for magic potency. At the same time, the vessel's concrete materiality provides an irresistible link to the past. Its malignancy is perhaps less an inherent quality than a result of its misuse by people whose relationship to the history it

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[182] R. C. Turner, "Boggarts, Bogles and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Lindow Man and the Oral Tradition," in *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog,* ed. I. M. Stead, J. B. Bourke, and Don Brothwell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 173).
[183] Dinshaw, *How Soon,* 99.

embodies is fundamentally toxic. In *Branwen*, after all, the cauldron's evil potential is only activated after its autochthonous owners undergo brutal oppression.

After recounting his meeting at Llyn y Peir, Matholwch relates how at first he tolerated Llasar, Cymidei, and their brood, but that after sixteen months, "*wynt eu hun yn peri eu hatcassu*" ("they made themselves hated"), "*yn gwneuthur sarahadeu, ac yn eighaw ac yn gouudyaw guyrda a gwragedda*" ("insulting and begging and vexing well-born men and women.")[184] In consultation with his nobles, Matholwch then resolves to get rid of them. He has an iron house built, into which he lures Llasar and his kindred. After they are plied with food and drink, the iron house is sealed and heated white-hot. Llasar and Cymidei are able to burst through the metal wall and escape to Britain, presumably bringing the cauldron with them. All the rest of their family perishes. The depiction of a leader mass-murdering a despised minority in a specially constructed, sealed chamber adds a horrific prescience to what is already among the more disturbing scenes in medieval literature. It also provides another contrast in styles of leadership—Bendigeidfran welcomes the refugees into his kingdom. In the subsequent Branch, *Manawydan fab Llŷr*, they seem to have established a cottage industry as master enamellers.

The text thus provides an account of the cauldron's origins that in fact elucidates nothing about the object itself, its maker or its terrible magic. Rather, the *peir* becomes a vessel through which different visions of origination can be explored and critiqued. For Matholwch, the aboriginal inhabitants of the lake are interlopers in his country. Their presence threatens the well-born ("*guyrda a gwragedda*"), a category constructed to exclude those who bear a more direct connection to Ireland's archaeological antiquity than any others in Matholwch's realm. Only by exterminating them can his kingdom achieve an integrity, albeit one based in erasure.

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[184] *Branwen*, 7.

Bendigeidfran, much as he accepts an offer of exogamy that promises to make his land more like itself, accepts these displaced autochthones into the social fabric of Britain. Moreover, his *having* done this, seemingly prior to the beginning of the text, implants these foreigners inextricably into the insular unity over which he rules.

Across the Gulf

Matholwch's casual recounting of his genocidal exploits ultimately does nothing to upset the marriage plans. Bendigeidfran still gifts him the cauldron, an act of misdirected repatriation that will have dire consequences later on. Branwen goes with her husband to Ireland, but is soon blamed for the insults and damages the king suffered in Wales. Beaten and consigned to the kitchens, Branwen resorts to extraordinary measures to alert her brother to her mistreatment.

> *Ac yn hynny, meithryn ederyn drydwen a wnaeth hitheu ar dal y noe gyt a hi, a dyscu ieith idi, a menegi y'r ederyn y ryw wr oed y brawt. A dwyn llythyr y poeneu a'r amharch a oed arnei hitheu. A'r llythyr a rwymwyt am uon eskyll yr ederyn, a'y anuon parth a Chymry, a'r ederyn a doeth y'r ynys honn. Sef lle y cauas Uendigeiduran, yg Kaer Seint yn Aruon, yn dadleu idaw dydgweith. A diskynnu ar e yscwyd, a garwhau y phluf, yny arganuuwyt y llythyr, ac adnabot meithryn yr ederyn yg kyuanned.*[185]
>   (And meanwhile, she tamed a starling bird on the edge of her kneading trough, and taught it language, and explained to the bird what sort of man her brother was. And she took a letter of the pains and dishonor she was enduring. And the letter was tied to the root of the bird's wing, and it was sent towards Wales, and the bird came to this island. This was the place it found Bendigeidfran, in Caer Saint in Arfon, where he was one day in council. And it perched on his shoulder, and ruffled its feathers, so that the letter was revealed, and they realized the bird had been tamed in a household.)

The layered communication strategies in this passage are striking. Branwen teaches the starling language (*ieith*, as in the Gwrhyr passages of *Culhwch*),[186] but rather than entrusting it to convey a verbal message, she commits her sufferings to writing. Upon reaching Bendigeidfran,

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[185] *Branwen*, 9.
[186] See pages 77 and 82-83ff.

the bird reverts to the preverbal, performing a gesture to reveal the letter attached to its leg. Why does the text introduce the extraordinary communicative act of human-animal dialogue, only to resort to carrier pigeon-level technologies for the actual transference of information and a naturalistic movement for the notification alert?

As always, the possibility of unreconciled versions layered within the same text provides an easy explanation. But the careful detail of this sequence suggests a more conscious intention. Each communication, after all, passes between different pairs of actors. Branwen teaches the starling to speak, recovering in this project the intimacy denied her in Ireland. Furthermore, this miraculous breaking of boundaries between species gives the exiled "White Raven" the same access to nonhuman worlds represented by Gwrhyr's abilities in *Culhwch*,[187] again disrupting the temporal surface of the text with an appeal to an earlier, even prelapsarian, possibility of concord amongst different species. For the letter to her brother, both a familial note and a political document that will spur an invasion, Branwen resorts to writing, generating an incontrovertible textual artifact of her "pains and dishonor." The starling's coy ruffle, in turn, is doubly eloquent—it not only reveals the letter but testifies that the bird has been "*meithryn… yg kyuanned*," "raised in a household." This reassurance of domesticity is perhaps welcome, in a world where messages from enigmatic sources—like Llassar's pronouncement about his family's time-bending fertility—can have ominous and unforeseen consequences.

The letter spurs Bendigeidfran and his warriors to action. Here, the text adds an intriguing note on the geographical alterity of the past. "*Bendigeiduran, a'r yniuer a dywedyssam ni, a hwylyssant parth ac Iwerdon, ac nyt oed uawr y weilgi yna: y ueis yd aeth ef. Nyt oed namyn dwy auon: Lli ac Archan y gelwit. A guedy hynny yd amlawys y weilgi, pan oreskynwys y weilgi*

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[187] See pages 77 and 82-83ff.

tyrnassoed"[188] ("Bendigeidfran, and the host of which we spoke, set out towards Ireland, and the deep sea was not wide then; he came by wading. There was nothing but two rivers: Lli and Archan, they were called. And after that, the deep sea expanded, when the deep sea conquered kingdoms.") This passage retroactively suggests the primordial closeness of Britain and Ireland, an intimacy shortly to be sundered by both political violence and catastrophic environmental change. The word translated here as "deep sea," [g]*weilgi*, is the same used to describe the Irish Sea watched by Bendigeidfran and his court in the tale's opening scene, and the waters overlooked by the feasting hall at Gwales later on. Derick S. Thomas notes that it "seems to be cognate with Ir. *fáelchú* 'wolf', and it is a metaphorical term, or kenning, for the sea."[189] This predatory agency is echoed in the verb [g]*oreskynwys*, "conquered, overran," which will be used again towards the end of the tale to describe Caswallawn fab Beli's violent takeover of Bendigeidfran's erstwhile kingdom.[190] But the landscape as described here is not *yet* a *gweilgi*—merely two rivers, which present no real obstacle for the giant king and his host. The latent ravening force that the Lli and Archan will one day become is evident only in narrative hindsight. In the distant past of the tale's setting, this barrier—like that between human and animal speech, history and present, even life and death—was less substantial. Presumably, no one involved in the creation of *Branwen* could have known what modern geology has uncovered: that until perhaps 16,000 BCE, Britain and Ireland were indeed linked by a landbridge, and lower sea-levels throughout the late Pleistocene meant their coasts were considerably closer than they are at present.[191] But the text invites its audience to imagine such a proximity, and to feel for its

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[188] *Branwen*, 9-10.
[189] *Branwen*, 19.
[190] *Branwen*, 15.
[191] Edwards, Robin and Anthony Brooks, "The island of Ireland: Drowning the myth of an Irish land-bridge?" *The Irish Naturalists' Journal* 29, *Special Supplement: Mind the Gap: Postglacial colonization of Ireland* (2008): 19-34.

loss. It suggests, moreover, that assumed originary unities (the Isle of Britain, history) are only fragments of larger and more fundamental entities, existing somewhere outside of narratable time.

The dreams of unity that the text conjures—marital, linguistic, temporal, spatial—are shattered in terrible bloodshed. Bendigeidfran's invasion ends in unmitigated disaster for both Britain and Ireland. This leaves alive, among the Britons, only the psychologically distraught Branwen (soon to die of a broken heart), her mortally wounded brother, and seven retainers. These seven include Pryderi and Manawydan—prominent characters in the rest of the *Mabinogi,* though marginal here—and "Talyessin,"[192] presumably the same bard who appeared in the Court List of *Culhwch ac Olwen*. His quiet but unmistakable presence in *Branwen* presents a conundrum. As mentioned above, Taliesin, "Shining Brow," is referred to in the *Historia Brittonum* in a manner that suggests he was believed to be a historical poet who lived and composed in northern Britain sometime in the late sixth century—loosely an Arthurian milieu, perhaps, but certainly later than the pre-Christian antiquity of *Branwen*. A medieval book of poetry bears his name, the *Llyfr Taliesin*. Some of the less fantastical poems in this collection have been claimed as authentic creations of this poet, including verses of praise addressed to Owein fab Urien, a hero discussed below in the context of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*.[193] While the genuine antiquity of these poems has come under increasing skepticism, the *Historia Brittonum* reference suggests that at least some medieval antiquarians viewed Taliesin as a historical figure who belonged to a specific milieu. Is the character in *Branwen* separate from the bard of the Rhegedian/Arthurian milieu? Without further explanation or a differentiating patronymic, it seems unlikely. The text instead seems to suggest that some degree of temporal manipulation is

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[192] *Branwen*, 15.
[193] *Trioedd,* 500. See pages 155-159.

occurring here. Perhaps Taliesin is being conceived of as an extraordinarily long-lived being, like the ancient animals of *Culhwch*. Alternately, Taliesin may appear here—as in certain of the poems in *Llyfr Taliesin*—as a figure capable of defying time's arrow and strictures, not through simple longevity but rather through the (literal and metaphorical) boundary-crossing that Ford and Jones identify as a Brittonic bard's core capability.[194] Amidst all the death that surrounds him, it is tempting to view Taliesin as the posited vessel through which knowledge of the tale's events can reach across the centuries.

A Spell of Time

Removed from his body and thus amenable to transport, Bendigeidfran's head recounts to his retainers all that will happen to their company, exactly as it unfolds in the narrative. The survivors begin at Harlech, back where the tale started, and spend seven years there, charmed by three magical birds. They then proceed to Gwales in Penfro, to "*lle teg brenhineid uch benn y weilgi*," "a fair kingly place up above the deep," conveniently featuring a spacious hall.[195] As Catherine McKenna notes, this scene seems set up as a failed attempt to restore the serene unity and authority of the tale's opening moment.[196] In the hall, the company notice three doors, two open and one, facing Cornwall, shut.

> *'Weldy racco,' heb y Manawydan, 'y drws ny dylywn ni y agori.' A'r nos honno*
> *y buant yno yn diwall, ac yn digrif ganthunt. Ac yr a welsynt o ouut yn y gwyd, ac yr a*
> *gewssynt e hun, ny doy gof udunt wy dim, nac o hynny nac o alar yn y byt. Ac yno y*
> *treulyssant y pedwarugeint mlyned hyt na wybuant wy eiryoet dwyn yspeit digriuach na*
> *hyurydach no honno. Nyt oed anesmwythach, nac adnabot o un ar y gilyd y uot yn hynny*
> *o amser, no fan doethan yno. Nit oed anesmwythach ganthunt wynte gyduot y penn yna,*
> *no phan uuassei Uendigeiduran yn uyw gyd ac wynt. Ac o achaws y pedwarugeint*
> *mlyned hynny y gelwit Yspydawt Urdaul Benn.*

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[194] Ford, "Death," 41-50; Jones, *Darogan*, 68.
[195] *Branwen*, 16.
[196] McKenna, "Colonization," 117.

("Look before you," said Manawydan, "that door, we must not open." And that night they were there, lacking nothing and enjoying themselves. And whatever they had seen of grief right before them, and whatever they themselves had suffered, did not come to their memory at all, neither that nor any sorrow in the world. And there they spent eighty years, such that they had never taken a more enjoyable nor lovely spell of time than that. It did not become more irksome than when they had come there, nor did any of them know from the other how much time it had been. It was not more irksome to them to have the head there, than when Bendigeidfran had been alive with them. And because of those eighty years, this is called the Hosting of the Noble Head.)

The language of this passage seems to directly confront Augustinian notions of how time's passage relates to human experience. In Gwales, memory, attention, and expectation are no longer in agonizing tension. Rather, they coincide perfectly. Unable to see the effects of aging on one another, the veterans are unable to mark time, or uninterested in doing so. Just as the Oldest Animals in *Culhwch* had measured temporality by observing and enduring growth, decay, and constant flux around them, so the seven companions are able to abrogate it through the lack of any such signs. Memory collapses into meaninglessness—the dim awareness that Bendigeidfran has not always been a severed, disembodied head does not matter, since he is no less pleasant in this form than when he had been alive. The result is not only happiness, but an "*yspeit digriuach [a] hyurydach*" ("a more enjoyable and more lovely space of time") than *any* they had experienced, before or since their traumatic venture in Ireland. The personal effects of this trauma, like time itself, are put on hold. The text seems to dwell wonderingly on this affective dimension of the Gwales sojourn, emphasizing that of all the [*g*]*ouut*, the grief, that had once been "*yn y gwyd*," literally "in their faces"—*ny doy gof udunt wy dim*, "memory did not come to them at all." This is not a loss of cognizance, as they certainly retain an awareness of who they are, and even (as is presently revealed) of the prohibition against opening the door towards Cornwall. But the mechanisms that imbue the gap between now and then with negativity—regret, nostalgia, loss—are no longer operable, because these depend on the ever-

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twisting *distentio animi* that comes only with an awareness of time. The narrative itself enacts the radically altered temporality of the feasters; note how the first night passes, and then, suddenly, eighty years have gone by.

Mac Cana describes how the Gwales sojourn "takes us from the story-teller's pseudo-historical world to the Otherworld of perpetual youth and plenty and happiness, a sudden transition which is not unusual in Celtic literature." Yet compared with Irish descriptions of a lavish and joyful otherworld, the Welsh writer presents "a bare and soulless outline" of this space-beyond-time, though one that perhaps the audience could have filled in, using the words "merely to set the spark of suggestion."[197] The text's description of Gwales "is objective and impersonal and conjures up a vision of timelessness and oblivion to the world's cares rather than active enjoyment of the Otherworld pleasures."[198] As with the cauldron, Mac Cana's otherwise astute observation is hampered by his supposition that Gwales must be compared with Irish otherworlds. But Gwales is a real place—the tiny uninhabited island of Grassholm, a few miles off the Pembrokeshire coast. Lonely amidst the spray of the Irish Sea, it is indeed an evocative location (though perhaps, depending on when the promised inundation of the space between Britain and Ireland is meant to occur, it is not intended to be quite so isolated in the era of the story as it is in the present). Unlike the fairy-filled tumuli of Irish narratives, Gwales has no natives. It is devoid of history and its associated traumas. In this spatiotemporal void, the companionship of the seven survivors, together with the head of their king, create a world insulated from time's flow. There is no need to imagine the opulent pleasures of the Irish *síd* courts. Indeed, the text suggests not overabundance but rather perfect sufficiency. Moreover, by

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[197] Mac Cana, *Branwen*, 85.
[198] Mac Cana, *Branwen*, 178.

limiting details of physical description but dwelling on the mental states of the veterans, the

narration emphasizes the subjectivity on which their experience relies.

But as Bendigeidfran himself had warned them, it will not last. Heilyn son of Gwynn

suddenly becomes curious about the closed door.

> 'Meuyl ar uy maryf i,' heb ef, 'onyt agoraf y drws, e wybot ay gwir a dywedir am hynny.'
> Agori y drws a wnaeth, ac edrych ar Gernyw, ac ar Aber Henueleu. A phan edrychwys,
> yd oed yn gyn hyspysset ganthunt y gyniuer collet a gollyssynt eiryoet, a'r gyniuer car a
> chedymdeith a gollyssynt, a'r gyniuer drwc a dothoed udunt, a chyt bei yno y kyuarffei ac
> wynt; ac yn benhaf oll am eu harglwyd. Ac o'r gyuawr honno, ny allyssant wy orfowys
> namyn ky[r]chu a'r penn parth a Llundein.[199]
>   ("Shame on my beard,' he said, 'if I don't open the door, and know whether it's
> true what is said about it.' He opened the door, and looked on Cornwall, and on Aber
> Henfelen. And when he looked, all the loss they had ever suffered, and all the loved ones
> and friends they had lost, and all the evil that had come upon them, became as clear to
> them as if they had experienced it right there; and chief of all, [the loss] of their lord. And
> from that moment, they could not rest, but rather headed straight for London.)

Mac Cana's exposition of this passage is worth quoting in full:

> The sense is finely reflected in the disposition of the words, the first clear taut phrases
> marking the irrevocable action, then the single verb *edrychwys* showing that, the very
> instant Heilyn looked towards Cornwall, he and his companions were oppressed once
> more by their ancient cares, their number and burden mirrored in the sequence of three
> co-ordinate clauses echoing the word *cyniuer* and each containing the suggestive
> repetition of half-alliteration, and all this leading up to the brief statement of their greatest
> sorrow of all, the realization that they had lost their lord and sustainer, Bendigeidfran.[200]

Speaking of the door, Heilyn wonders about the truth "*a dywedir am hynny*," "of what is

said about it." His use of the impersonal is striking. The text is clear that it was first

Bendigeidfran, and then Manawydan, who explained the nature of the door towards Cornwall.

Perhaps the narrative suggests that in the intervening eighty years, this detail has been forgotten,

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[199] *Branwen*, 17.
[200] Mac Cana, *Branwen*, 178.

or seems irrelevant. Alternately, Heilyn's subtraction of agency may be an attempt to avoid personal blame for what follows. He is not questioning his lord or his companion directly, only disembodied received wisdom.

In many ways, the Hosting of the Noble Head recalls the legend of the Seven Sleepers. In Dinshaw's analysis, this fable epitomizes the medieval ability to imagine journeys through time, while also abstracting spiritual experience from worldly concerns—it is a tale in which "history is merely what you sleep through."[201] Dinshaw also highlights the story of King Herla from Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialum*, a variant on the "Seven Sleepers" or "Rip Van Winkle" motif (D 1960.1 in the Stith Thompson index.) For Dinshaw, this tale represents a narrativizing of Augustine's notion of painful *distensio animi.* Returning from the wedding of a mysterious pigmy, which occurs in a strange lamplit realm within a cliff and seems to last only three days, Herla finds himself barely understood by a man he meets along the road. It turns out Herla has missed the Saxon conquest of England—

> '*Domine, linguam tuam uix intelligo, cum sim Saxo, tu Brito; nomen autem illius non audiui regine, nisi quod aiunt hoc nominee dudum dictam reginam antiquissimorum Britonum que fuit uxor Herle Regis, qui fabulose dicitur cum pigmeo quodam ad hanc rupem disparuisse, nusquam autem postea super terram apparuisse. Saxones uero iam ducentis annis hoc regnum possederunt, expulsis incolis.*'
> ("Sir, I can hardly understand your speech, for you are a Briton and I a Saxon; but the name of that Queen I have never heard, save that they say that long ago there was a Queen of that name over the very ancient Britons, who was the wife of King Herla; and he, the old story says, disappeared in company with a pygmy at this very cliff, and was never seen on earth again, and it is now two hundred years since the Saxons took possession of this kingdom, and drove out the old inhabitants.")[202]

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[201] Dinshaw, *How Soon*, 55.
[202] Walter Map, *De nugis curialum*, ed. and trans. M. R. James with revisions by C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 28-29.

Walter, as Dinshaw notes, ends this section with a sort of joke—the phantom riders have ceased, but their perpetual (and oppressive) motion has been transferred to Henry II's court. Thus, "…asynchrony caused by immersion in the temporality of the otherworld is used to diagnose Walter's own unbearably out-of-joint present."

Stories like Herla's will figure prominently in the third chapter of this dissertation, their heroes likewise queered "out of the arena of ordinary patriarchal reproduction."[203] In comparing Herla's story to *Branwen*, however, the importance that the Welsh ascribed to the Saxon conquest of England is crucial. As Aled Llion Jones writes, "The 'original historical sin' of the Welsh is that identified by Gildas [the *adventus Saxonum*], and the paradisiac totality that is broken, and from which they are excluded, is the sovereignty of Britain and the history of *brut/d*"[204]—that is, of intertwined legendary history and prophecy. The historical event associated with the Hosting of the Noble Head is not the invasion of the Saxons, however, but rather Caswallawn fab Beli's usurpation of the throne of Britain. Yet the figure of Caswallawn seems to derive from Cassivelaunus, king of the Catuvellauni, who opposed Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain in 54 BCE and was incorporated into Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* as Cassibelaunus. In the *Trioedd*, Caswallawn is linked to conflict against the Romans,[205] and this in turn is conceptualized as the first in a sequence of *gormesoedd*, "oppressions," which culminate in the *adventus Saxonum*.[206] Crucially though, it is not the Roman invasion that occurs in relation to the return of the seven survivors from Ireland; rather, it is merely the accession of the king who will confront them, the first Briton known from outside accounts of the island. It is not foreigners who stage a traumatic entry here, but chronicle. The

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[203] Dinshaw, *How Soon*, 62-63. See Chapter III, Part II. Lovers Occulted: *Lanval, Graelent*, and *Guingamor*.
[204] Jones, *Darogan,* 31.
[205] *Trioedd*, 85.
[206] *Trioedd*, 90-93.

chaotic arrival of history represents as dramatic an intrusion as any magical event in the rest of the *Pedair Cainc*.

Yet *Branwen* differs in three key respects from the "Seven Sleepers" or "Herla" tale-type. First, the seven head-escorts are aware of the passage of great spans of time. As explicitly related in the terms of their sojourn, they know decades are passing. But they do not feel time's passage in emotional (or, seemingly, physiological) terms. Rather than a moment of reveal that opens centuries-long vistas of unexperienced time, the revelation in *Branwen* occurs on a purely affective level.

Secondly, and perhaps more bizarrely, the time that the Seven Who Came from Ireland spend in their otherworldly feasting does not seem to occur in the outside world. When Manawydan and Pryderi complete their quest, they go to render homage to the usurper Caswallawn, whose ascension greeted their return to Britain. There is no recognition that they are doing so eighty years late; their act of obeisance is read as the customary act of nobles towards a new king. Pryderi's mother, Rhiannon, likewise seems unaffected by the long decades spent in the Assembly of the Head—she remains sprightly and marriageable.

This too reads as a reversal of the Seven Sleepers model, in which uncanny time is experienced as brief interval while outer time rolls relentlessly onward for an extraordinarily long span. In *Branwen*, uncanny time is known to be long, but not experienced as long. Meanwhile, outer time seems to progress at roughly the *experiential* rate of uncanny time, rather than its objective rate.

Thirdly, the epistemic break that grounds the Seven Sleepers legend—the transformation of pagan time into Christian dominion—is paralleled by developments that occur *before* the Seven Who Came from Ireland enter their occultation, rather than after it. Rather than

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conversion, this change is a break into history, from the unchronicled British past into the reign of Caswallawn.

Nor is the opening of the door really a failure to obey a magical command. Though Manawydan warns his companions not to open it, the Head has already told them that they will stay in Gwales eighty years, before opening the door. And after eighty years have passed, they do, and time, like the rivers between Britain and Ireland, rushes out to flood the empty space.

Critiquing a large body of (primarily) twentieth-century scholarship on the *Mabinogi*, Catherine McKenna notes that "to focus critical attention on an indeterminable moment in the remote past when the Four Branches might have had their original, or true, structure is to endorse the notion that the culture of a colonized people is authentic only in a fixed originary moment."[207] This is particularly poignant to consider in light of *Branwen*'s simultaneous interest in origins and acknowledgment of their ever-elusive nature. For McKenna, this dual mythological interest of modern scholars and of the texts themselves create "a tension between the traditional, or mythological, and the literary, or fictional."[208] This tension is exacerbated by the lack of any significant alternate versions of the texts, which might create a sense of both the cultural tradition behind them and the interventions of particular authors. As it is, we are left with a few very similar versions (those of the *Llyfr Gwyn* and the *Llyfr Coch*, plus the Peniarth fragment), so that the *Pedair Cainc* in their totality come to seem "a seamless and inevitable conjunction of nature and nurture, of content and form, of inherited tradition and authorial intervention."[209] On such limited terms, the disentangling of pre-existing story, specific

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[207] McKenna, "Colonization," 105.
[208] McKenna, "Colonization," 106.
[209] McKenna, "Colonization," 107.

emplotment, and textual instantiation becomes all the more difficult, rendering the temporal distortions of the narrative all the more palpable.

The text of *Branwen,* however, constantly militates against the idea that the past can be easily and painlessly brought into the here and now. Nowhere is Carolyn Dinshaw's notion of asynchrony as "restless ghosts haunting the present"[210] more evident than in *Branwen*, in which archaeological finds generate undead warriors and primal unity is posited only to be mutilated, scorned, inundated by water and time.

Yet *Branwen* returns, time and again, to dreams of connection across these floods. "*A uo penn bit pont*" ("Whoever would be the head, should be a bridge,") Bendigeidfran declares, making his body a bridge for his men to cross over. Even when he himself is literally reduced to a head, his Hosting strives to reunite the fragmented human consciousness of time, and so instantiate a cure for deep trauma. An impossible desire for contact across spatial and temporal distance stimulates many of the more fantastic moments in *Branwen*. The cauldron, Branwen's bird, Bendigeidfran wading across the narrow sea—all imagine an ancient reality in which insurmountable quantities can in fact be overcome. It is perhaps no coincidence these desires are precisely those that modern technology aims to satisfy, striving towards greater interconnection, faster communication, and the abrogation of death.

If *Culhwch ac Olwen* depicts a past that overspills any attempt to contain it within history, *Branwen ferch Llŷr* narrates a tale of origins that, like the cauldron of "rebirth," seem incapable of generating any future other than death and ruin. The experience of time is inextricably bound up with pain, on every scale from the personal to the international. But by

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[210] Dinshaw, *How Soon,* 34.

subordinating chronology to subjectivity, *Branwen* suggests an escape from teleological destiny no less promising than the effusive anachronicity of *Culhwch*.

Part II.

Let Slip the Past*: Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and "Yr Adfail"

In his famous *Marwnad Llywelyn ap Gruffudd* ("Lament for Llywelyn ap Gruffudd"), the late 13th-century poet Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch mourns the death of the last native Prince of Wales in anguished verse that has come to represent the crushed aspirations of Welsh sovereignty following the Edwardian conquest of 1282. Llywelyn's death is compared to Arthur's, the proverbial end of the Brittonic golden age—"*Llawer llef druan fal ban fu Gamlan,*" "Countless pitiful cries, as when Camlan occurred." But even more poignant is a rhetorical question later in the poem. "*Poni welwch chwi'r byd wedi r'bydiaw?*"— "Don't you see that the world is done being?"[211]

Poetry is prone to hyperbole. The Welsh struggle for independence did not die for good in 1282; over a century later, Owain Glyndŵr's rebellion achieved meteoric success before eventually faltering before the superior resources of the English crown. But Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch's invocation of a present-perfect apocalypse, an end that has already happened, is an apt epigraph for the final two works discussed in this chapter. Both seek meaning in a world where heroic narrative is a sad anachronism, and the glorious British destiny dreamed in *Armes Prydein* has been relegated to some alternate timeline.

Breuddwyd Rhonabwy stages a journey from the legible political landscape of 12th-century Wales into the paradox-ridden heroic past. While the dense elements of parody and rhetorical display throughout this difficult text have provoked a wide range of interpretations, my analysis proposes to take seriously the depiction of Rhonabwy's journey through time. Dreaming

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[211] Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch, "Marwnad Llywelyn ap Gruffudd," in *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, ed. Thomas Parry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962): 47 and 48.

himself into history, Rhonabwy ruptures the continuity between past and present. In doing so, he highlights both the artificiality of historic emplotment and opens the question of whether an escape from such a narrative might be possible. The *Breuddwyd* seems to ask if an investigation into the past is capable of reconfiguring the present, or at least imagining an alternative to it. In Dafydd ap Gwilym's mid-14th century poem "Yr Adfail" ("The Ruin"), a poet meditates on time's ability to both create and undermine meaning through memory. Dafydd's elegiac poem deconstructs the interrelation of temporality and subjectivity through a dialogue between a speaker paralyzed by erotic nostalgia and a ruined structure incapable of mnemonic recognition.[212] In a world done being, it interrogates the purpose of reconstructing the past.

Both texts speak powerfully to an interest in imagining the stakes of counterintuitive temporal motion, of retrograde experience rather than the forward momentum of quotidian life. In doing so, they pick up on and expand the chronological dilemmas of earlier texts such as *Culhwch ac Olwen* or *Branwen ferch Llŷr*. The great adventures and passions of legendary antiquity are only accessible through visions of time-travel, but that enterprise is itself fraught with danger—of becoming caught in the past, triggering a radically new present, or foreclosing the future's openness. In this light, the difficulties (or even impossibilities) of interpretation posed by these texts (particularly *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*) are perhaps best approached as integral features of their composition. Just as David Wittenberg argues that the tangled temporal threads of the time-travel story only reconcile on the level of the *text* itself, so *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* insists on its status as a written object. "Yr Adfail," by contrast, dislocates voice from speaker so

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[212] In this, it displays a striking resemblance to a common formula in the *nasīb*, or prologue section of the Classical Arabic *qaṣīda*, in which the narrator's erotic reminiscences are sparked by his encounter with the *aṭlāl*, the remains of his beloved's abandoned campsite (for a concise description of these features and their poetic functions, see the Introduction to Michael A. Sells, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabic Odes by 'Alqama, Shánfara, Labíd, 'Antara, Al-A'sha, and Dhu al-Rúmma*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989, 4-5).

thoroughly that it denies the possibility of words to cohere into anything so substantial as a meaningful point of origin. In the fallen worlds of these texts, time-travelers find themselves caught between an imagined past that seems to foreclose any path to the present; and a dreamed future that remains tangled in an ever-receding history.

3. Dreaming the Virtual Past in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*

A twelfth-century lord sends a group of henchmen to track down his rebellious brother, somewhere along the Welsh border. These men shelter overnight in a miserable dwelling, where amongst the refuse and animal waste lies a yellow steer-skin. When it comes time to sleep, one of the gang chooses this as his bedding. He falls asleep and is immediately catapulted into a vision in which he and his companions come across a fearsome rider, whose horse draws in the fleeing men with its breath. The rider reveals himself as the warrior who instigated the Battle of Camlan, in which Arthur and all his court were slaughtered. Yet he leads the dreamer and his companions onward to where Arthur and his host are gathering, preparing not for Camlan but for the earlier Battle of Baddon, in which the warlord famously overcame the Saxons. Arthur mocks the men of the twelfth century for their puny size and shabbiness, and eventually turns his attention to playing a board game with his cousin. As the game progresses, it seems to dictate the fortunes of a brutal struggle between Arthur's men and his cousin's ravens. Finally, Arthur crushes the game pieces, and a truce is arranged with the Saxons. The British host sets out for Cornwall, and their commotion wakes the dreamer, who has slept for three nights and three days.

Breuddwyd Rhonabwy, "Rhonabwy's Dream," exists in only a single manuscript, the monumental *Llyfr Coch Hergest.* As has been mentioned in the preceding sections, the book was

compiled sometime in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries. Though much of its content

is certainly older, specific dating has proved contentious. Critics have placed the *Breuddwyd*'s

composition anywhere from the immediate vicinity of Madog ap Maredudd's reign, which

provides the mid-twelfth century setting of the frametale; to shortly before the compilation of the

Llyfr Coch two and a half centuries later.[213] Our ignorance about the *Breuddwyd*'s age only

compounds the other difficulties of interpretation that the text presents.

A Quest for Context

      Not least of the challenges presented by the tale is the question of genre. Codicologically,

Breuddwyd Rhonabwy occupies a somewhat odd position in *Llyfr Coch Hergest.* It follows *Saith*

Doethion Rhufain (*The Seven Sages of Rome*) and precedes *Proffwydoliaeth Sibli Ddoeth*

(*Prophecies of the Wise Sibyl*), with a further eleven texts and text segments separating it from

the next piece that would eventually be included (as the *Breuddwyd* was) in Lady Charlotte

Guest's *Mabinogion,* and subsequent editions based on it—*Owein*, the romance also referred to

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[213] T. M. Charles-Edwards, for instance, favors the idea that it was "composed during the lifetime of Madog ab Maredudd, who died in 1160, or shortly after his death," defending this against the later dates of Melville Richards (c. 1220; Helen Fulton roughly concurs; (Fulton, "Magic," 8)) and Thomas Parry (c. 1250). He does so on the basis of the key passage in which Arthur berates the time-travelers from Madog's reign, which will be discussed in more detail below. To Charles-Edwards, this "looks very much like satire aimed at contemporaries. There would be much less point to it if it were written two generations later, and so aimed at the generation of the author's grandparents" (Charles-Edwards, "Date," 22.) Joseph Falaky Nagy echoes this assessment, describing the *Breuddwyd* as portraying "the adventures of a Welshman roughly contemporaneous with the text itself…" (Nagy, "Hearing," 135); Oliver Padell rejects it, preferring a much later date, nearly contemporary with the sole manuscript witness (O. J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 75.) J. Angela Carson identifies a historical Heilyn Goch who lived in the late 14th century, and makes this a chronological fix for the text (J. Angela Carson, "The Structure and Meaning of *The Dream of Rhonabwy*," *Philological Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1974): 293)—though there seems to be little beyond the names to link these figures, and other commentators have not taken up her arguments. Mary Giffin's detailed survey of the heraldry and military technology on display in the text's lavish descriptions led her to hone in on the reign of Gruffydd ap Owein (1293-1309), last Prince of Powys before its annexation by England (Mary Giffin, "The Date of the Dream of Rhonabwy," *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, London (Session 1958): 38-40.) The negative evidence of the text's absence from the mid-14th century *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch*, together with its summative relationship towards prior Arthurian tradition and links to the scientific and prophetic interests of the milieu in which the *Llyfr Coch Hergest* was produced (Catherine McKenna, "What Dreams May Come Must Give Us Pause': *Breudwyt Ronabwy* and the Red Book of Hergest," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 58 (Winter, 2009): 97-98) make a late date appear promising.

as *Iarlles y Ffynnawn* (*Lady of the Fountain*). This may suggest that the compilers of the *Llyfr Coch* considered *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* something apart from the more straightforward narratives of the *Pedeir Keinc*, or the other "native tales" and "romances." Catherine McKenna notes that while this placement "seems random," a consideration of the neighboring texts suggests the *Breuddwyd*'s participation in a rich intellectual ecosystem: "the codicological context of *Breudwyt Ronabwy* associates it with history, with native and international learned traditions, and most particularly and closely with arcane modes of knowledge such as vision and prophecy."[214] McKenna further makes the crucial observation that this clustering seems to foreground questions of interpretation, of reading incisively and separating data from noise. *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, she concludes, "was surely a reminder that while we must try to read the signs offered to us by prophecy, the stars, the weather, our dreams, and our bodies, and to find the meaning in both story and history, interpretation is at every level a process as perilous as it is vital."[215]

The *Breuddwyd* simultaneously invites interpretation and seems to foreclose the ability that any reading might lead to a dependable conclusion. This difficulty stems in part from the text's uniqueness. There is nothing quite like *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* in medieval Welsh literature, or, indeed, in medieval literature more broadly. The Irish tale *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* ("The Dream Vision of Mac Conglinne")*,* in which a poet conjures a vision of a world made of food to exorcise a gluttony demon from a possessed king, is sometimes cited as a parallel.[216] More distantly, the erotic French *Roman de la Rose* and Chaucer's dizzying *House of Fame* provide comparanda in the realm of surreal dream visions, unmoored from a clear

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[214] McKenna, "What Dreams," 74.
[215] McKenna, "What Dreams," 98.
[216] Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, ed., *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1990).

eschatological or religious aim.[217] Perhaps the closest work in terms of oneiric experimentation is the Icelandic *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* ("Star-Oddi's Dream"),[218] discussed further in footnote 220, below.

But unlike all these texts, which have a clear narrative through-line, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is defiantly un-plotted. It no sooner sets up a conflict than it digresses into elaborate descriptions and lengthy lists. The most extended dramatic portion, Arthur and Owein's *gwyddbwyll* game, builds masterfully before crumbling, literally, into nothingness. The *Breuddwyd* is often called a parody or satire on traditional Arthurian narrative,[219] seemingly because it is hard to tell what else it could possibly be. It may be poking fun at the sordid squabbles and puny people of Madog's day, or the heroic pomposity of Arthur's; alternately, it could be targeting the elaborate rhetoric of prose writers, or championing their art against the incomprehensible pretensions of poets.

Though these widely varying readings suggest a rather scattershot text, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is in fact carefully and masterfully composed. The interplays of materiality and immateriality, the real and the virtual, the subjectivity of the dreamscape and the lavishly described historic past, are all closely connected to the *Breuddwyd*'s account of a journey back in time. The importance of this feature is hard to overstate, since *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* was

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[217] Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meung, *Roman de la Rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy (Paris: Librarie Honoré Champion, 1965-1970); and Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, in *The Riverside Chaucer* (Third Edition), ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 347-374. Catherine McKenna notes that the *Rose* was certainly read in 14th century Wales, though in general "the differences between *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and the conventional medieval European dream vision are more striking than the similarities" (Catherine McKenna, "*Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*," in *Arthur in the Celtic Languages: The Arthurian Legend in Celtic Literatures and Traditions*, ed. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan and Erich Poppe (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019), 80).

[218] Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds. *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, in *Harðar Saga (Íslenzk fornrit 13)* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1991).

[219] E.g., Fulton, "Magic," 15 and 20; Davies, *Mabinogion*, xxi; Edgar M. Slotkin begins his analysis by stating that "…a general consensus has developed which has regarded the work as some sort of satire" (Edgar M. Slotkin, "The Fabula, Story, and Text of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 18 (Winter 1989): 89).

composed at a time when such a trope was essentially unknown. Visions of the future, particularly the apocalyptic future, have a long pedigree; classical and medieval poets sometimes claimed to summon ancient ghosts to provide eyewitness accounts of bygone times; as discussed in previous sections, critics have identified time-travel tropes in stories of the Seven Sleepers, who sleep for centuries and emerge into a much-changed world. But Rhonabwy, whose vision transports him some 650 years back in time, has some claim to being fiction's first voyager into the past.[220] We might question whether a dream is quite the same as a mechanistic journey through the centuries. However, the text seems mindful of the paradoxes that result from moving against time's flow. While Rhonabwy is present in the past, visible to Arthur and his men, he remains strictly an observer, seemingly unable to act upon the tableaux unfolding before him. And, perhaps to avoid interfering with progressive causality, time seems to flow backwards throughout the vision. The Battle of Camlan, in which Arthur and all his warriors were killed, has already occurred; the Battle of Baddon, meant to occur at noon, instead dissolves into the truce that precedes it. This backwardness extends to the mimetic relationship between wargames and actual conflicts, with the latter taking shape from the former rather than vis-versa.

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[220] One possible alternate contender is the eponymous hero of the late medieval (late 14th c. ?) Icelandic *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* ("Star-Oddi's Dream"), who dreams he is listening to a storyteller recite a tale of ancient Gotland. As soon as a character named Dagfinn is introduced, however, Star-Oddi begins dreaming that he *is* Dagfinn, forgets the "frame-dream," and takes part in the subsequent adventures as Dagfinn. The tale is analyzed at length in Ralph O'Connor's "Astronomy and Dream Visions in Late Medieval Iceland: *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* and the Emergence of Norse Legendary Fiction" (*The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 111, no. 4 (October 2012): pp. 474-512). O'Connor mentions *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* along with the Irish *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* as examples of late medieval fictions that use dream as springboards for fantastic narrative invention (510), though he does not comment on the shared feature of a dream journey into the past. *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* differs from *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* in numerous important ways – the characters Star-Oddi encounters are unique to his tale, rather than pre-existing heroes like Arthur and Owein; and his adventures with them are fantastic in the usual vein of Icelandic romances, rather than the truly reality-bending qualities of Rhonabwy's dream-world. The double frame of *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* further highlights the invented nature of its dream, whereas Rhonabwy's experiences leave open the possibility of an encounter with a thoroughly weirded but not purely imaginary past. Still, by dreaming about his personal involvement in wondrous adventures of ancient times, Star-Oddi earns a place alongside Rhonabwy in the early canon of time travelers into the past.

The result is a mis-en-abime of interrupted causality. The past that Rhonabwy visits cannot be the history that results in his present; but by the same token, the present into which he ultimately awakes is unlikely to be the same one in which he fell asleep, three days before. A temporal disjuncture thus opens between the dream and its "frame," though this word implies a narrative structure which surrounds the embedded element on both sides. While Rhonabwy's twelfth-century world sets the stage for his dream, it does not re-emerge—except in an extraordinarily brief and inconclusive fashion—at its end. As Arthur's cavalcade rides for Cornwall, the narrator intervenes: "*A rac meint y kynnwrwf hwnnw deffroi a oruc Rhonabwy. A phan deffroes yd oed ar groen y dinawet melyn, gwedy ry gyscu ohonaw teir nos a thri dieu*"[221] ("And with all that commotion, Rhonabwy woke up. And when he woke up, it was on the skin of the yellow steer, after having slept on it three nights and three days.") From there, the text launches into its enigmatic colophon:

> *A'r ystorya honn a elwir Breidwyt Rhonabwy. A llyma yr achaws na wyr neb y breidwyt, na bard na chyfarwyd, heb lyuyr, o achaws y geniuer lliw a oed ar y me[i]rch, a hynny o amrauael liw odidawc ac ar yr aruev ac eu kyweirdebeu, ac ar y lleneu gwerthuawr a'r mein rinwedawl.*[222]
> (And this story is called Rhonabwy's Dream. And this is why no one knows the dream, neither poet nor storyteller, without a book: because of the multitude of colors that are on the horses, and this: the diverse wonderful colors on both the arms and their gear, and on the precious mantles and the occult stones.")

While this analysis will return to these defiantly opaque sentences, it is important to note here that this conclusion offers no glimpse of the world into which Rhonabwy awakes, no record of what his companions have been doing while he slumbers on, no glossing of his bewildering experiences. This refusal of the expected second half of the "frame," perhaps more than any

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[221] Melville Richards, ed. *Breudwyt Rhonabwy, allan o'r Llyfr Coch o Hergest* (Caerdydd [Cardiff], Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1948), 21.
[222] *Breudwyt,* 21.

other feature, has left interpretation of the dream wide open.[223] Yet a politics of refusal, I will argue, is central to the *Breuddwyd*'s project. The text suggests that only through a denial of causal games—board games, war games, historical emplotment, and narrative more broadly—is it possible to break free of the cyclical violence that the past wreaks upon the present.

The Dung Ages

The tale opens enmeshed in the petty politics of twelfth-century Wales. The ruler of Powys, Madog fab Maredudd of Powys, is locked in contention with his jealous brother Iorwerth fab Maredudd. When Iorwerth refuses a post as Madog's warband chief, and instead launches a raid into England, Madog dispatches teams of men to track him down. One of the groups engaged on this *keis* ("endeavor, search, quest") consists of Cynwrig Frychgoch ("Red-Freckled Cynwrig, presumably a ginger), Cadwgan Fras ("Stout Cadwgan"), and the epithetless Rhonabwy. Seeking lodging, they come upon the house of Heilyn Goch fab Cadwgan fab Iddon. Here, the text launches into its first extended description. Heilyn's dwelling is:

> *hen neuad purdu tal unyawn, a mwc ohonei digawn y ueint. A phan doethant y mywn y gwelynt lawr pyllawc anwastat; yn y lle y bei vrynn arnaw abreid y glynei dyn arnaw rac llyfnet y llawr gan vissweil gwarthec a'e trwnc. Yn y lle y bei bwll, dros vyngwyl y troet yd aei y dyn gan gymysc dwfyr a thrwnc y gwarthec.[224]*
>
> (an old hall, totally black, with a straight gable end, and smoke coming from it, a very great deal. And when they came inside, they saw an uneven, leaky floor; any place that was higher, a man could barely stand on, because of how slippery the floor was with cattle dung and their piss. Any place that was lower, a man would go over his ankle in the slop of water and cattle piss.)

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[223] *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is not unique in this regard. Chaucer's *House of Fame* likewise leaves the frame unfinished, and any guess as to the "truth value" of the dream's encounters purely conjectural. But Chaucer's narrative is explicitly allegorical-fantastical – its revelations occur on a transhistorical plan of meaning, quite different from the highly specific (albeit "weirded") geographical and chronological setting of the *Breuddwyd*. The *House of Fame,* moreover, both foregrounds its thematic concerns with dreaming in its opening and invocation, and contains nearly as little information about its dreamer's pre-slumber activities as *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* does about Rhonabwy's awakening.

[224] *Breudwyt*, 2,

The description continues in this vein, noting the smoke, the churlish inhabitants of the place, and the flea-infested bedding. One feature only receives a positive mention—on the dais, Rhonabwy and his companions spot "*croen dinawet melyn… A blaenbren oed gan un onadunt a gaffei vynet ar y croen hwnnw*"[225] ("a yellow steer skin… And good luck[226] was with one of them, who would get to go onto that skin."). This is seemingly a narratorial comment. There is no indication that this information is conveyed by any of the hall's inhabitants, and when Rhonabwy does choose to sleep on the skin, he does so because he is so tormented with discomfort that he decides anything would be better than the tattered, vermin-ridden bedding provided for him. As Catherine McKenna points out, the insalubrious conditions of Heilyn Goch's house would have suggested, to any learned reader of the fourteenth century, "circumstances… extremely inconducive to revelatory dreaming,"[227] which was widely believed to depend on a comfortable environment and untroubled physiognomic condition. At the same time, the description of the lucky steer's hide seems intended "to awaken in the reader an expectation of a revelatory dream," either by reference to parallels in Irish narrative, or (as McKenna suggests is more likely) in Latin descriptions of incubatory dreaming rituals, such as that present at the beginning of *Historia Regum Britanniae.*[228] The tale seems perfectly calibrated to suggest that whatever dream Rhonabwy experiences will be both irrelevant and laden with meaning. Impressively, the narrative that follows seems to fulfill both conditions.

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[225] *Breudwyt*, 2.

[226] The *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* states that *blaenbren* means specifically "the privilege gained because the tip of the staff used for drawing lots falls towards one" (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, s.v. "blaenbren," http://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html).

[227] McKenna, "What Dreams," 81.

[228] McKenna, "What Dreams," 85-87.

"*Ac yno y kysgwys. Ac yn gytneit ac yd aeth hun yn y lygeit y rodet drych idaw y vot ef a'e gedymdeithon yn kerdet ar traws Maes Argygroec…*"[229] ("And there he slept. And as soon as sleep came into his eyes, a vision was given to him that he and his companions were going across the Field of Argyngroeg…") *Drych* implies an intense visual experience – it is related to the verbal noun *edrych*, "looking," the action which prompts the disintegration of the Gwales sojourn in *Branwen*.[230] From the profound ugliness of Heilyn Goch's house, assaulting the senses on all levels, Rhonabwy is transported to a world where sight and sound predominate. While never as viscerally unpleasant as the sensations of his host's dwelling, the stimuli of the dreamscape are frequently as bizarre as they are sumptuous.

The first indication that this is no ordinary dream comes quickly. Rhonabwy hears a *twryf*, a clamor or uproar.[231] In medieval Welsh narrative, this word often designates a psychosonic disturbance signaling the immanent intrusion of the weird, and this instance is no exception. A young rider appears, richly dressed in greens and yellows. Yet something in his aspect terrifies the dreamer and his companions. "*A rac druttet y gwelynt y marchawc dala ofyn a wnaethant a dechreu ffo. Ac eu hymlit a oruc y marchawc. A phan rynnei y march y anadyl y wrthaw y pellaei y gwyr y wrthaw. A phan y tynnei attaw y nesseynt wynteu attaw hyt ym bron y march. A phan y gordiwedawd erchi nawd a orugant idaw*"[232] ("And because of the ferocity they saw in the knight, they became afraid, and began to run away. And the knight made his pursuit of them. And when the horse exhaled its breath, the men were driven from it. And when it breathed

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[229] *Breudwyt*, 3.
[230] Catherine McKenna suggests that the word, which can also mean "mirror" or "form," could here be a calque on *visum*, a dream category linked to the "phantasma" or "incubus." As she notes, Macrobius' description of this sort of dream does seem to correspond at least to the beginning of Rhonabwy's experience - "In this drowsy condition, a person thinks he is still awake, and imagines he sees specters rushing at him or wandering vaguely about, differing from natural creatures in size and shape, and a host of divers things, either delightful or disturbing." (Macrobius, I.iii.7, p. 89) (McKenna, "What Dreams," 88-89).
[231] *Breudwyt,* 3.
[232] *Breudwyt*, 4.

in, they were drawn close to it, right to the horse's chest. And when he overtook them, they begged for mercy.")

Already, a fantastic element intrudes into the dreamscape. While the knight's sumptuous clothes certainly cut a contrast with the squalor of Heilyn Goch's hall, his appearance has such *druttet*—"harshness," "ferocity," or perhaps "recklessness"—that Madog's three warriors run from him. These are tough men, tasked with tracking down the recalcitrant Iorwerth and his warband, and so there is an uncanniness to their terror, perhaps provoked by the initial *twryf*. This strange impression is immediately confirmed by the extraordinary power of the horse's breath, which seems to gust with gale force, as exaggerated as any heroic quality described in *Culhwch*'s Court List. The rider introduces himself as Iddog fab Mynio, known as *Cord Prydein,* "the Agitator of Britain." Rhonabwy asks him to explain this name, and the knight obliges:

> '*Vn oedwn o'r kenadeu yg Katgamlan y rwng Arthur a Medrawt y nei. A gwr ieuanc drythyll oedwn i yna, ac rac vy chwannocket y vrwydyr y tervysgeis y rygtunt. Sef y ryw teruysc a orugum, pan ym gyrrei i yr amherawdyr Arthur y venegi y Vedrawt y uot yn datmaeth ac yn ewythyr idaw, ac rac llad meibon teyrned Ynys Prydein a'e gwyrda, y erchi tagnefed. A phan dywettei Arthur yr ymadrawd teckaf wrthyf o'r a allei y dywedwn ynneu yr ymadrawd hwnnw yn haccraf a allwn wrth Vedrawt. Ac o hynny y gyrrwyt arnaf ynneu Idawc Cord Brydein. Ac o hynny yd ystovet y Gatgamlan. Ac eissoes teirnos kynn gorffen y Gatgamlan yd ymedeweis ac wynt, ac y deuthum hyt ar y Llech Las ym Preydein y penytyaw. Ac yno y bum seith mlyned yn penydyaw. A thrugared a gefeis.*'[233]
>
> ("I was among the messengers at the Battle of Camlan between Arthur and Medrawd his nephew. And I was a young, high-spirited man then, and because of my eagerness for battle I stirred up strife between them. This was the kind of strife I made, when the Emperor Arthur sent me to explain to Medrawd that he was both foster-father and uncle to him, and, to avert the slaying of the sons of the kings of the Isle of Britain and their nobles, to seek peace. And when Arthur would say the fairest speech to me that he could, I would relate that speech in as ugly terms as I could to Medrawd. And due to that, they gave me the name, Iddog Cordd Prydein. And from that was woven the Battle of Camlan. And yet three nights before the end of the Battle of Camlan, I forsook it, and I came as far as The Gray Stone in Pictland, to do penitence. And there I was seven years in penitence. And I received mercy.")

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[233] *Breudwyt*, 4-5.

Iddog's speech immediately suggests that Rhonabwy's dream has brought him either into an encounter with a ghostly spirit, or with a magical "sleeper" reawakened into the present (like the Seven Sleepers, or Arthur himself, in some versions of the legend). The penitential recounting of wrongs may suggest the former, with the final line, *"A thrugared a gefeis,"* ("I received mercy") perhaps indicating salvific judgment. On the other hand, a dream of the return of Arthur's warriors—long promised to the Britons—may be understandable for the inhabitants of a Welsh principality locked in internecine strife.

Yet a troubling detail opens other possibilities. When the dreamer first spots Iddog, the latter is described as *"gwraenc penngrych melyn,"*[234] "a young man with yellow curly hair." But Iddog is clear in his description of himself at Camlan—he was a "young man" (*gwr ieuanc*) *then* (*yna*), at least seven years before "now." While it is certainly possible for youth to cover a span longer than seven years, Iddog's insistence on a contrast between then and now indicates that he possesses lived experience that somehow exceeds the physical form of his body. Moreover, far from that of a sober penitent, his fearsome appearance suggests that Rhonabwy is encountering a pre-penitential Iddog—albeit one with such complete awareness of what will befall himself and his companions that he speaks of these events in the *past*.

Another rider now approaches, and asks Iddog for *"ran o dynyon bychein hynny gantaw,"*[235] "a portion of these puny men before you." This is the first indication of some size difference between the men of Powys and the characters of the dream, recalling the enormous size of the ancient creatures in *Culhwch*. Iddog tells the rider he will grant him *"bot yn gedymdeith udunt ual y bum,"*[236] ("to be a companion to them, as I have been"). Satisfied, the

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[234] *Breudwyt*, 4.
[235] *Breudwyt*, 5.
[236] *Breudwyt*, 6.

other rider continues on, and when Rhonabwy asks who he was, Iddog names him as "*Rwawn Bybyr uab Deorthach*." The name doesn't seem to have any particular resonance for Rhonabwy, perhaps because he hasn't memorized the "Court List" from *Culhwch*—had he, he may have recognized Rwawn as another of Arthur's warriors, appearing there shortly after Gwynn ap Nudd. Iddog's suggestion that he himself has been a *cedymdeith*, a companion, to the puny men of Powys, is likewise interesting, as he has thus far done little other than answer a few questions. Iddog's claim of friendship hangs like the *blaenbren* of the steer-hide over the tale, a promise of benefit (and thus significance) that the text refuses to instantiate.

The little party continues on to Rhyd-y-Groes, a ford on the Hafren (the Severn, a traditional boundary between Wales and England). Here the great reveal occurs: "*Ac y lan y Ryt y deuthant. Sef y gwelynt Arthur yn eistedd mywn ynys wastat is y Ryt*" ("And they came to the shore of the Ford. There they saw Arthur, sitting on a flat river meadow below the Ford.")

Unlike nearly every other dream-figure, Arthur receives no description (notably, his cousin and opponent, Owein fab Urien, does not either.) Nor does he announce himself, or receive an introduction from Iddog. His identity as the preeminent figure of British legend is self-evident. That Rhonabwy recognizes him without asking may indicate some degree of dream logic. But it testifies also to his growing realization of the nature of the dream – namely, that he has somehow entered the Arthurian milieu.

Arthur, however, is less than impressed with his visitors.

> '*Duw a rodo da ytt,*' heb yr Arthur. '*Pa du, Idawc, y keueist di y dynyon bychein hynny?*' '*Mi a'e keueis, arglwyd, uchot ar y ford.*' Ssef a oruc yr amherawdyr, glas owenu. '*Arglwyd,*' heb Idawc, '*beth a chwerdy di?*' '*Idawc,*' heb yr Arthur, '*nyt chwerthin a wnaf, namyn truanet gennyf vot dynyon ky vawhet a hynny yn gwarchadw yr ynys honn gwedy gwyr kystal ac a'e gwarchetwis gynt.*'[237]

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[237] *Breudwyt*, 6-7.

("God prosper you," said Arthur. "Where, Iddog, did you find these puny men?" "I found them, lord, down on the way." This is what the emperor did: a scornful smirk. "Lord," said Iddog, "why are you laughing?" "Iddog," said Arthur, "I am not laughing, but rather I feel miserable, that men as shitty as this guard this Isle, after such men as guarded it before.")

This passage that has led some scholars to both see the *Breuddwyd* as fundamentally satirical, and to date it to the lifetime of Madog ap Maredudd or shortly thereafter.[238] Arthur's description of Rhonabwy and his companions as "*ky vawhet a hynny*," "as shitty/filthy as this," is certainly a dig at their suitability to guard Britain, especially together with the reference to them as "*bychein*," "little" or "puny." But it is also a literal description of their state, after sleeping amidst the cattle muck in Heilyn Goch's hall. In contrast to the splendid appearance of Arthur's warband, the men of Powys are literally caked in manure. That Rhonabwy, Cynwrig, and Cadwgan retain their filthy condition from their sleeping place is the first meta-oneiric moment of the dream. The second occurs immediately after Arthur's insults, when Iddog—generally the answerer of questions—asks something of Rhonabwy. "*Ac yna y dywawt Idawc, "Rhonabwy, a wely di y vodrwy a'r maen yndi ar law yr amherawdyr?" "Gwelaf," heb ef. "Vn o rinwedeu y maen yw, dyuot cof yti a weleist yma heno; a phei na welut ti y maen ny doei gof ytti dim o hynn o dro*"[239] (And then Iddog said, "Rhonabwy, do you see the ring and the stone in it, on the emperor's hand?" "Yes, he said. "One of the virtues/occult powers of the stone is, a coming into your memory of what you see here tonight; and if you hadn't seen the stone, none of this time [or journey, or twist] would come into your memory.")

Iddog once again weaves mystery in with his explanation. By identifying the time as *heno*, tonight, he confirms Rhonabwy's impression that the latter is dreaming. Yet there is no

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[238] See, for instance, Charles-Edwards, "Date," 22.
[239] *Breudwyt*, 7.

indication that the action within the dream is occurring at night. Indeed, the exhaustively colorful description seems to suggest otherwise, and there is soon to be an allusion to it being sometime before noon. Iddog knows that Rhonabwy is dreaming, then; but he also makes clear the importance of remembering the dream beyond its confines. Even more peculiarly, the *rinwed*, "virtue," "occult power," of the stone in Arthur's ring seems intended for Rhonabwy only—it is hard to see how any of the emperor's court could benefit from such an ability. Marginal as he is to the action, disdained by Arthur and the heroes of the past, Rhonabwy is nonetheless the only figure for whom the magic of the emperor's ring could be intended. Moreover, the apparent efficacy of the stone's magic upon Rhonabwy's waking memory, beyond the boundary of the dream, implies an inextricable imbrication of the two realities.

Turning Back Time

Up until this point, the possibility remains that Rhonabwy is dreaming of an encounter with ghosts, or of an encounter with Arthur and his men, woken at last from their enchanted sleep. Certainly Arthur, by contrasting *yn gwarchadw,* "guarding," with *gwarchetwis gynt*, "guarded once," seems to identify the present as Rhonabwy's own twelfth century. But it is equally possible to read Arthur's comment, like Iddog's *heno*, as belonging to an awareness of two times unspooling simultaneously—Rhonabwy's temporality, according to which it is nighttime in the mid-1100s, and a temporality internal to the dream, operating on different rules.

This suspicion is soon confirmed. A man subsequently identified as Caradog Freichfras (known from the *Trioedd* as one of Arthur's leading lords, and adopted into Continental literature as King Carados) declares "*bot yn ryued kysseingaw llu kymeint a hwnn yn lle ky gyfyghet a hwnn, ac a oed ryuedach ganthaw bot yma yr awr honn a adawei eu bot yg Gweith*

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Uadon erbynn hanner dyd yn ymlad ac Osla Gyllellwa[w]r"[240] ("that it was a marvel, a host as great as this to be contained in a place as narrow as this; and it was more of a marvel to him, that those were here at this very hour who had pledged to be at the Struggle of Baddon by noon to fight Osla Big-Knife.") Arthur concurs, and leads his host to Caer Faddon (Baddon Castle, or the City of Baddon).

Caradog's announcement strongly suggests that the internal time of the dream is in fact the early sixth century, the age of Arthur's famous triumphs against the Saxons. Equally implied, as Edgar M. Slotkin points out, is that this dream-time flows backwards.[241] Iddog's paradoxical knowledge of futures past, and his youthful appearance, now make sense. Like T. H. White's Merlin, he and his companions are living in reverse, aware of their fates as "past" but borne away from them, into their prior exploits. With the invocation of Baddon's immanence, and the retrograde motion of time, it is here—not quite halfway into the text—that *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* establishes its credentials as a story of time travel.

Strikingly, the two Arthurian moments to which the *Breuddwyd* alludes are the very two that were assigned traditional dates. The twelfth-century *Annales Cambriae* mention Arthur's battles of Baddon (*Mons Badonicus*) and Camlan at years 72 and 93, respectively,[242] which correspond roughly to 516 and 537 CE. Baddon particularly received short shrift from romancers—its brief mention in *Historia Regum Britanniae* is quickly eclipsed by Arthur's fanciful campaigns against the Romans, and by the time of Mallory it had been fully excised from the legend. In the context of a time-travel story, the choice to allude to these events, rather than more famous but less datable ones, suggests an intentional focus on chronology – almost a

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[240] *Breudwyt*, 8.
[241] Slotkin, "Fabula," 94.
[242] Henry W. Gough-Cooper, transcriber, *Annales Cambriae: The A text, from British Library, Harley MS 3859, ff. 190r-193r* (Bangor: Welsh Chronicles Research Group, 2015), http://croniclau.bangor.ac.uk.

dial-setting specificity. It is furthermore interesting to contrast *Breuddwyd*'s fantasy of unproblematic transtemporal communication and British victory with Carolyn Dinshaw's reading of the Herla legend, discussed in conjunction with *Branwen* above, in which time lapse *forward* causes a breakdown in linguistic understanding, while "the legacy of the historical violence… remains unresolved."[243] Time that runs from the Saxon conquests through Arthur's death and on to his greatest victory is time directed towards the prelapsarian originary unity of Britain as posited by *Armes Prydein*, a primordial whole that is no sooner enunciated than it is broken.

The contradiction between Iddog's story of Camlan and Caradog's invocation of Baddon has been noted by other critics. Melville Richards describes it as "*anachroniaeth ddybryd*," "a flagrant anachronism."[244] Slotkin expands on this, invoking the Russian structuralist terms around which he shapes his analysis.[245] As he points out, the temporal arrangement by which Camlan precedes Badon "directly reverses the chronology of the Arthurian fabula it represents." Yet even more strikingly, while the Battle of Baddon is invoked, established as bound to happen, it is nonetheless never reached—it "never takes place, nor do the characters act at any time as if they expect it to." Slotkin goes on:

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[243] Dinshaw, *How Soon,* 63.
[244] Slotkin, "Fabula," 96.
[245] Since these terms are also densely employed by David Wittenberg in his discussion of the narratology of time-travel fictions, it is worth rehearsing them here. The three core terms are *fabula*, *sjuzhet* (which Slotkin follows Mieke Bal in terming *story*), and *text.* The former is the ostensible logical/chronological progression of events, which is conceived as forming a basis for the *sjuzhet/story*—the telling of those events in a particular way, which may involve rearranging them, obscuring details, filtering them through an unreliable narrator, and so on. (However, as Wittenberg argues, since *fabula* and *sjuzhet* are in fact produced simultaneously, it is not true that the latter is based upon the former—this is merely an audience's fictive intuition, akin to the suspension of disbelief.) A particular *sjuzhet/story* may then be committed to a fixed form (not necessarily that of a physical book); this is the *text*. For Wittenberg, time travel stories trouble the relationship between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, by making it "impossible to presuppose or determine any single consistent relationship between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, and requiring, therefore, more or less artificial or narratively supplemental mechanisms of coherence" (Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 7).

> …from the moment we first hear of the battle of Badon '*yr awr hon'* ('now'), according to Caradawg at the ford, we are eventually pushed back from it in time '*hyt ym penn pythewnos a mis*' ('to the end of a fortnight and a month'). The story motion is still backwards in time in relation to the fabula to which it refers, since we do know that the battle of Badon takes place at some time.[246]

Breuddwyd Rhonabwy refuses to depict the climactic event of Arthur's career; refuses, also, to grant the time-traveler access to this decisive event. Instead, the tale ultimately concludes in a period of peace, seemingly before Baddon. Overall, Slotkin comments, this "retrograde relationship" of story and *fabula* is obscured, largely because the text "manages to disguise the fact that there is any narrative going on in it at all." The overwhelming description present throughout the text – about thirty-seven percent, by Slotkin's count[247]—is positioned here as a device to prevent the story from being told.[248] Yet just as the dream fails to enunciate its significance, the "importance signaled through description is never fulfilled in the story-events."[249] The assumed causal relationship between narratorial attention and ultimate dramatic or thematic payoff is undone.

Oneiric Temporality

In this refusal to gloss itself, Slotkin sees further evidence of "how much like a real dream" the *Breuddwyd* appears to be, in contrast to the vast majority of other medieval dream-vision texts. Like quotidian dreams, it is devoid of "complete narratives with Aristotelian beginnings, middles, and endings," and so could be said to satirize conventional dream narratives by "presenting a dream vision as if it were a real dream."[250] Yet Slotkin's detailed analysis belies

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[246] Slotkin, "Fabula," 97.
[247] Slotkin, "Fabula," 99.
[248] Slotkin, "Fabula," 98.
[249] Slotkin, "Fabula," 101.
[250] Slotkin, "Fabula," 94.

his claim of realism. Most dreams do not lend themselves to being read as artistic objects. They do not possess structural unities, or suggest complex and premeditated aesthetic schemae. And, crucially, they do not threaten their dreamers with physical harm.

For most of his dream, Rhonabwy does exceptionally little other than follow Iddog, ask him questions, and observe the bizarre pageantry and elaborate decoration of the dream-world. But his sole attempt to establish his causal importance within the dream is dramatically rejected. As the hosts arrive at Baddon, Rhonabwy notices a tumult amidst the army. "'*Idawc,' heb y Rhonabwy, 'ae ffo a wna y llu ragof?' 'Ny ffoes yr amherawdyr Arthur eiryoet, a phei clywit arnat yr ymadrawd hwnn gwr diuetha vydut'*"[251] ("Iddog," said Rhonabwy, "does the host retreat before me?" "The Emperor Arthur never retreats! And if those words were heard from you, you would be a dead man.") The dung-spattered Rhonabwy's brief presumption of his own formidable presence seems intended as a joke; likewise the taboo on associating anything Arthur does with the verb *ffo*, "retreat." But Iddog's rebuke confirms Rhonabwy's inability to cause anything to happen within the dream—to do anything, that is, other than watch, inquire, and follow the proceedings.[252] And once again, there is a further enigma in Iddog's warning. What would it mean for Rhonabwy to become a "*gwr diuetha*," a slain or destroyed man, within his own dream? While dying within a dream stereotypically leads to awakening, Rhonabwy is ultimately awakened not by experiencing any mortal accident, but rather by the clatter of Arthur's armies. Is it possible for Rhonabwy to actually die within the dream? The early

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[251] *Breudwyt*, 10.

[252] *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* thus seems to occupy an unusual position vis-à-vis the modern category of the "lucid dream," that is, a dream in which the dreamer is aware that she is dreaming and capable of taking decisive agentive action based on that knowledge. The lucid dream is not a medieval category, and indeed it is unclear how it might be correspond or interface, if at all, with the recognized medieval dream taxonomies derived from Macrobius, Aristotle, or others. Rhonabwy's metaoneiric awareness suggests a certain degree of lucidity, even as his inability to do more than observe the proceedings passively indicate otherwise. In dreams as in time travel, questions of the possibility of true agency are foregrounded.

thirteenth century French romance *Perlesvaus* depicts a squire who is wounded within a dream, wakes up, and dies of his injuries;[253] modern viewers of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise are likewise well aware that in certain fictional universes, dying in dreams can have fatal real-world consequences. Arthur's ring, together with both his and Iddog's earlier comments, have already established the dual awareness the dream characters have of Rhonabwy as both a figure present within their reality and as an interloper to whom different rules apply.

It is thus hard to say at what level Iddog's threat is intended to operate, but Rhonabwy, for his part, seems to take the warning seriously. He makes no further attempt to center himself within his dream-vision, and indeed remains largely silent for a significant remainder of the text. Slotkin suggests that the unfolding tableaux he witnesses represent "an icon for Arthur's world,"[254] resisting both motion and narrative. The overall static nature of the dream—along with Iddog's ominous injunction—suggest an awareness that, to the extent that Rhonabwy is *present* within the past, he cannot really *act* in the past. As a passive observer, he does not run the risk of interrupting causality. Similarly, having time run backwards is an ingenious way to evade the issues of causal paradox that dog stories of time travel into the past. (Here it is tempting also to think of Benjamin's reading of Klee's angel, watching the disasters of history pile up before it as the storm of progress blows it backwards into the future.[255]) Static and observant, Rhonabwy's condition brings to mind the opening of *Branwen*, with its stationary figures watching an unruly sea, waiting for the event to break over the horizon. Interestingly, this

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[253] William A. Nitze and T. Atkinson Jenkins, eds., *Perlesvaus* (*Vol. I*) (New York: Phaeton Press, 1972), 28-29. This bizarre Arthurian romance was adapted into Welsh around the end of the fourteenth century as the sequel to a Welsh version of *La Queste del Saint Graal*. However, as the text for this second portion lacks a modern edition, very little work has been done upon it. The most substantial study by far is Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan's unpublished thesis, "A study of *Y Seint Greal* in relation to *La Queste del Saint Graal* and *Perlesvaus*," (D.Phil. thesis, St. Anne's College, Oxford, 1978), https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:e32f2f44-16d5-40c1-b35a-14d238508c1f/.
[254] Slotkin, "Fabula," 103.
[255] Benjamin, "Concept," 392.

is a view of the past endorsed by some physicists. Richard Gott compares the past to "a recorded film," viewable but unchangeable, and thus impermeable to paradox.[256] Certainly Rhonabwy's experience of the past bears uncanny resemblance, in its foregrounding of the visual and its denial of causality, to a film run backwards.

Both of these features of the dream—backwards time, and the dreamer's inaction—seem like narratorial attempts to wrestle with the stakes of journeying into the past. David Wittenberg wonders if the frequent inability of time travelers to change the past (understood metatextually as a logical paradox, but intuitively *possible* within the narrative) is a conservative maneuver "through which time travel fiction pushes back against its own drive to become more radical, subversive, or chaotic than its customary niches in popular fiction might tolerate." This constitutes "a crisis in which generic expectations collide with a heightened drive toward narratological radicalism." However, "given that time travel stories open up the possibility of altering or damaging" the temporal integrity of the non-paradoxical and quotidian world, "even of rendering it *ex post facto* impossible, they also offer the opportunity to critique the conditions (narratological, psychological, and ideological) under which stories find themselves compelled to repostulate it."[257]

In Wittenberg's analysis, stories of time travel exist in a tension between the reification of history (and hence historical injustice), and the subversive potential of a substantive intervention in the past, capable of reconfiguring the future from which that past is accessed. By highlighting the shabbiness of his own era before offering Rhonabwy access to heroic antiquity, the *Breuddwyd* seems to beg the dreamer to attempt such a reconfiguration. But just as the dream is caught between the significant vision implied by the steer hide and the meaningless *insomnium*

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[256] Discussed in Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 157.
[257] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 152.

suggested by Rhonabwy's unbearable sleeping conditions, it simultaneously insists on Rhonabwy's centrality (as in the matter of Arthur's ring) and his irrelevance. If Rhonabwy's presence as an emissary from a future time is the cause of chronology's backward flow within the dream, that same recession into an ever deeper past seems to foreclose the possibility that he could enact anything of significance along either timeline.

Game Time

The difficulties of causality unspooling in reverse surface prominently in the longest set piece of the *Breuddwyd*, and perhaps its most bewildering—the game of *gwyddbwyll* that Arthur plays against his cousin Owein once they have encamped near Baddon. As they play a series of rounds of the boardgame, meticulously-described messengers continually interrupt to tell them, first that Arthur's followers are attacking Owein's ravens; then, the reverse. Each in turn pleads with the other to call off his followers; each, in turn, refuses, and insists the game continue. Increasingly, it seems as if the fortunes of the game decide the outcome of the off-stage battle between men and birds. This builds to a gory crescendo in which Owein's banner is raised, causing the ravens to redouble their assault. The panicked messengers describe Owein's ravens savagely mutilating Arthur's troops and horses, croaking and tearing them to pieces. Only then does Arthur finally take decisive action—"*Ac yna y gwasgwys Arthur y werin eur a oed ar y clawr yny oedynt yn dwst oll, ac yd erchis Owein y Wers uab Reget gostwng y vaner. Ac yna y gostyghwyt ac y tagnouedwyt pob peth*"[258] ("And then Arthur crushed the golden *gwyddbwyll*-men that were on the board until they were completely dust, and Owein asked Gwres son of Rheged to lower the banner. And then it was lowered, and everything was at peace.")

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[258] *Breudwyt*, 18.

Rachel Bromwich speculates, regarding Owein's avian followers, that "these mysterious ravens originally denoted *Owein*'s own band of fighting men, since *brân* is used figuratively in poetry for a warrior… This conclusion is supported by the concluding words of *Iarlles y Ffynnawn* which state that *Owein* became Arthur's *pennteulu* [commander of his personal warband], and then apparently equate the *teulu* with *Owein*'s ravens."[259] Yet the *Breuddwyd* evinces less a confusion over poetic epithets and more a commitment to reifying the profound alterity of the past. In this dreamscape, metaphors flow backwards together with time itself, and warriors compared to ravens become sentient ravens tearing human warriors apart.

The game Arthur and Owein play, *gwŷddbwyll*, is not well understood. Its name is cognate to the almost equally-mysterious Irish *fidchell*, with both deriving from a reconstructed Common Celtic **widu-kʷeillā*, ("wood-understand"). Mark A. Hall and Katherine Forsyth propose that this etymology "enshrines the principal that this was a game of *skill* played on a *wooden* board."[260] This emphasis on intentionality rather than luck would seem to recenter questions of agency in the match between the legendary cousins.

Breuddwyd Rhonabwy's depiction of a game controlling the narrative flow of an external event is an unsettling one, threatening the integrity of both categories. Audrey L. Becker notes that "Games, though they may be literary, are not literature; the rules of gaming are different from the rules of narrative."[261] But literature, conversely, may easily encompass, contextualize, and itself come to resemble games. This is perhaps especially true of fantastical literature, which depends on its audience's investment in a contained and altered causal system that is at particular

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[259] *Trioedd*, 469.

[260] Mark A. Hall and Katherine Forsyth, "Roman rules? The introduction of board games to Britain and Ireland," *Antiquity* 85, no. 330 (2011): 1331-1332.

[261] Audrey L. Becker, "Temporality, Teleology and the *Mabinogi* in the Twenty-First Century," in *Welsh Mythology and Folklore in Popular Culture: Essays on Adaptations in Literature, Film, Television, and Digital Media*, ed. Audrey L. Becker and Kristin Noone (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 204.

pains to distinguish itself from that of the outside, quotidian world.[262] The originating text of modern game studies, Johan Huizinga's 1938 *Homo Ludens*, posits the space within which games occur as a "magic circle," imagining the game as a sort of ritual performance occurring at a designated site, in which "the illusion of a temporary ideal world [is] set against the chaos and uncertainty of real life." But this "binary concept" has come under criticism more recently, with scholars such as Edward Castronova pointing out that games are in no way sealed off from the real world, with people crossing in and out and importing concepts from one to the other.[263]

A non-chance boardgame—as *gwyddbwyll* is likely to have been—seems to "comfortably occupy a Huizingian model" comprising "a square board," "fixed rules," "a beginning and an end," and repeatability. Yet as Jenny Adams remarks, medieval writers often explored the permeability of the "magic circle" in relation to games such as chess, depicting situations in which the game "is decidedly *not* isolated from the real world but instead furnishes a means to reimagine a social order, forge a relationship between two players, and/or teach lessons to those who watch."[264] Ann Martin points out that many medieval Welsh prose tales—such as *Gereint*, *Peredur*, *Iarlles y Ffynnon* (*Owein*), and *Culhwch*—employ gaming concepts as a means to structure the stakes of episodic adventures (*damweineu*, "accidents," "unpredictable occurrences").[265] By engaging in gamified behavior, heroes can emerge as clear winners, thus validating their material, social, and sexual rewards.

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[262] Ann Martin, "'Enchanted Games': Adventure and Game in the Middle Welsh Romances," in *Proceedings of the First North American Congress of Celtic Studies held at Ottawa from 26th-30th March, 1986*, ed. Gordon MacLennan (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 1988), 511. Martin even proposes that fantasy might be considered "the most realistic of all genres because it does not attempt to pretend that its inner economy corresponds precisely to that which lies outside its limits."

[263] These positions are summarized by Serina Patterson, "Introduction: Setting Up the Board," in *Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature*, ed. Serina Patterson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9-10.

[264] Jenny Adams, "Colonizing the Otherworld in *Walewein*," in *Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature*, ed. Serina Patterson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 128.

[265] Martin, "'Enchanted Games,'" 515.

The game in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, by contrast, works to tear social order apart rather than reimagine it—the horrific destruction wreaked by Owein's birds recalls the Twrch Trwyth's ultimately unsuccessful bid against civilization. And without further elaboration, it is hard to know how the relationship of the cousins Owein and Arthur is altered by their game. But Jenny Adams's third suggestion, on the lessons games provide to observers, is more promising. Given *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*'s opacity, however, this requires a caveat: whatever lessons occur, do so virtually and implicitly. Seen from this perspective, a "wargame" such as chess or *gwyddbwyll* is a deterministic simulacrum of human conflict, one in which future unfolds causally from past, with each step traceable back to an original stasis (and wholeness).[266]

Non-chance boardgames break down futures into sets of binary choices (to make, or not to make a certain move), trapping both players within a progression of scenes that deny any true possibility of narrative but which they are, nonetheless, compelled to perpetuate towards a zero-sum conclusion. The verbal contract to play ("*Owein," heb Arthur, "a chwaryy di wydbw[y]ll?" "Gwaryaf, arglwyd," heb Owein*"[267]—"Owein," said Arthur, "will you play gwyddbwyll?" "I will play, lord," said Owein) establishes a formal consent that both participants are reluctant to withdraw from.

From then on, the alternating pleas of each player to cease the game and attend to its bloody consequences assume a ritual aspect, further blending features of the *gwyddbwyll* rules, particularly play by turns, into the broader dreamscape.

> '*Arglwyd,' heb yr Owein, 'ti a glywy a dyweit y mackwy. Os da genhyt gwahard wynt ywrth vy mranos.' 'Gware dy chware,' heb ef."*
> …

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[266] This relationship between the game and the future is memorably expressed in one of the defining moments of post-human modernity, albeit a quiet one—chess world champion Gary Kasparov's 1997 defeat against Deep Blue, a computer that decisively established human inadequacy, vis-à-vis machines, in purely deterministic scenarios.
[267] *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, 11.

'Arglwyd,' heb Owein, 'gwahard dy wyr os da genny.' 'Gware dy whare,' heb yr amherawdyr.

...

'Arglwyd,' heb yr Owein, 'gwahard dy wyr.' 'Gware,' heb ef, 'os mynny.'

…

Ac edrych a oruc Arthur ar Owein a dywedut, *'Gwahard dy vrein.' 'Arglwyd,' heb yr Owein, 'gware dy chware.' A gware a wnaethant.*

…

'Owein,' heb Arthur, 'gwahard dy vrein.' 'Gware, arglwyd,' heb Owein, 'y gware hwnn.'[268]

("Lord," said Owein, "you heard what the lad said. If you please, call [your men] off from my ravens." "Play your move," he said."

…

"Lord," said Owein, "call off your men, if you please." "Play your move," said the emperor."

…

"Lord," said Owein, "call off your men." "Play," he said, "if you like."

…

"And Arthur looked at Owein and said, "Call off your ravens." "Lord," said Owein, "play your move." And they played."

…

"Owein," said Arthur, "call off your ravens." "Play, lord," said Owein, "*this* game.")

It is interesting to note here, along with the increasing terseness of the replies, the shift from "*dy chware*"—"your game, your move," but also "your part, your role"—to Owein's final, chilling, "*y gware hwnn*," *this* game. The monotony of these exchanges highlights the players' increasing lack of true agency, while the extreme physical damage wrought by Arthur and Owein's game completely shatters any notion of a Huizingian "magic circle."[269] As the body count rises, the game becomes depersonalized, a system (fate, or power) that owns its participants far more than they own it. For Ann Martin, the *gwyddbwyll* game in *Breuddwyd*

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[268] *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy,* 12-17.
[269] Compare, for instance, Nora Corrigan's extrapolation on Huizinga's definition—"It is tempting to see games as a medium through which conflicts can be worked out within safe, bounded spaces, without permanent damage to the participants." Or game designer Chris Crawford's comments, quoted in the same article—games, he claims, are "an artifice for providing the psychological realizations of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations." (Nora Corrigan, "The Knight's Earnest Game in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*," in *Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature*, ed. Serina Patterson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 147-168 at 147.)

Rhonabwy suggests not only "the affinity between games and war" but also an eerie sense in which "human beings are the pawns" within a wider, inscrutable web of consequences.[270]

At the same time, the alignment of the board game with the combat between men and birds is largely an artifact of narrative juxtaposition. The text itself thus becomes implicated in the pervasive influence of the game. Betsy McCormick draws on Huizinga in highlighting ways in which the text can "serve as a game world":

> The text itself can encompass multiple games: the author can play with the reader's expectations and/or the text can present itself as a game. The act of reading a literary text is also game-like as it draws readers into its "world" by creating a form of experiential play. So reading a literary game allows the reader to work out larger considerations, particularly the limits of actual experience, by playing with the social and cultural constructs found within this separate game space. And ultimately, playing any game – be it literary, physical, or virtual – has a cultural function because it produces a lasting representation of the game contest; Huizinga terms this participation the "fixed form," or cultural memory, of the play experience itself.[271]

As "contest," however, this "fixed form" (the historical text, or reified game) tends to overwrite complex cultural histories with simplistic hierarchies—victors and losers, or progress towards a single defined goal. Kipling's literary metaphor of the "Great Game," for instance, obscures a vast array of localized agencies and imperial brutalities, substituting instead the fiction of a gentlemanly contest between two different flavors of (white) supremacy. The conservatism of the fixed form recalls that of the time traveler, whose seeming ability to rewrite history is constantly rendered illusory by the paradoxes that hedge her actions. Insofar as time travel paradoxes always resolve themselves into the single, always-existent present from which we perceive the past, the game is unchangeable.

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[270] Martin, "'Enchanted Games,'" 519-520.
[271] Betsy McCormick, "Afterword: Medieval Ludens," in *Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature*, ed. Serina Patterson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 212.

Slotkin, however, perceives a way out of this dilemma. Calling the *gwyddbwyll* scene a "microcosm" of "the entire work," he notes that Arthur's crushing of the golden pieces is "a sign… of the way in which games and reality interact and a clue to the author's view of the traditional narrative he has undermined."[272] This traditional narrative—the Arthurian fabula, constructed to engender both a deep nostalgia for past glory and a looming sense of tragedy that haunts every idealistic endeavor—may be said to rely on the logic of the game, with its neatly delineated borders, winners, and losers. In this reading, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, like Arthur crushing the *gwyddbwyll* pieces, refuses the game that allows history's reconstruction as narrative.[273]

The Past as Metafiction

Slotkin's powerful reading recognizes that in the *Breuddwyd,* the "incoherence of the vision is a carefully contrived, quite coherent literary plan." The melting insubstantiality of the dream's ending is, like the golden dust that Arthur leaves on the gameboard, the only possible way out of an otherwise inevitable doom. As Slotkin points out, "The satire runs in a way *dictated* by the author's choice of embedded fabula and enhanced by the ways story and text are integrated or, rather, fail to be integrated." This is a comment on the narratological problem that is "built into the Arthurian biography for writers who wish to use it to celebrate and promote its values. It is, in the end, a fabula of failure, of collapse, of internal betrayal and breakdown," an ending highlighted by Iddawg's account of Camlan at the very start of the dream. Romanticizing of the Arthurian age runs up against "the fact that the age of the Arthur of tradition ends very

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[272] Slotkin, "Fabula," 106.
[273] The interconnection of gaming with alternate futurities, and the radical potential of refusing the game, are explored in a key of Lovecraftian nihilism in the 2018 "choose-your-own-adventure film" *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (David Slade, dir., *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*; Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2018).

badly." Aware of this, Rhonabwy's dream ends in peace only "at the conscious expense of avoiding anything that would justify an heroic atmosphere: heroic atmospheres are justified, after all, by people killing each other—no doubt for the best reasons—not by representing festive occasions in Cornwall."[274] Contrasting Rhonabwy's shit-caked twelfth century and the fantastical sixth into which he journeys, Slotkin writes that "The Arthurian age of Rhonabwy's dream ends up as a better world than Rhonabwy's because it either keeps deferring conflict or else, in the case of Arthur and Owein, finally rejects it and its symbols," whereas "if the Arthurian fabula were presented in its proper order, what we would get at the end is a world looking like Heilyn Goch's house"[275]—the historically-grounded, sordid reality of the story's opening. The text's author, Slotkin proposes, deliberately presents

> …the Arthurian fabula backwards, away from the present into a more and more distant past, at the same time avoiding the natural consequences of conflicts in narrative and revealing connections through elaborate mirroring and dialectic. That is certainly why the dream seems to have no consequence. Consequence depends upon sequence, resolution on a conflict to be resolved, and heroic resolve on a kind of militarism which the author of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* appears to disfavor.

In turn, this refusal of consequence within the dream "highlights the reality of the frame," emphasizing "not that the dream is an allegory but that the dream is a dream. The reality is that Arthur and Medrawd die fighting each other." So the satire becomes directed less at any particular time, past or present, and more "at stories about the past."[276] These traditional narratives posit a glorious origin, but cannot disguise the inevitable disintegration of lofty ideals into petty feudal squabbling. The *Breuddwyd*, in contrast, presents a vision in which bloodshed

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[274] Slotkin, "Fabula," 105.
[275] Slotkin, "Fabula," 109.
[276] Slotkin, "Fabula," 110.

can be averted, but only through virtual means, by rejecting a game that (like storytelling) stakes particular claims on reality. Hence Slotkin's rejection of the notion that the direction of satire can be read to date the text—*Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, he writes, is not specific to any era except all those in which Powys was "the victim of its narratives."[277]

While Helen Fulton's reading is quite different—for one, she identifies the *Breuddwyd* as a rather specific satire on a meeting between representatives of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth and John I of England in 1215[278]—she likewise notes how "[t]hrough satire and parody, the storyteller undermines the myth, embraced by Geoffrey of Monmouth, of a lost golden age of British superiority."[279] The magic elements of the text, as parodic as they are marvelous, "resist not only English hegemony but the damaging weight of the mythical British past."[280]

Both Slotkin and Fulton read *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy,* to some extent, as a political statement, one which implicitly critiques the cherished myths of its audience. Without denying the usefulness of these approaches, however, it is worth wondering why such a critique would enmesh itself in the paradoxes of dream and time travel fictions, all the while insisting that it is to Rhonabwy's benefit that he participate in this tangle and denying him the chance to do anything more than watch and ask.

Both dream visions and time travel narratives, after all, draw exceptional attention to their fictive status. As Steven F. Kruger points out, "The dream fiction, by representing in the dream an imaginative entity like fiction itself, often becomes self-reflexive. Dream vision is especially liable to become metafiction, thematizing issues of representation and

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[277] Slotkin, "Fabula," 111.
[278] Fulton, "Magic," 18-19.
[279] Fulton, "Magic," 20.
[280] Fulton, "Magic," 23.

interpretation."[281] Ambiguous dream categories, such as Macrobius' *somnium*, are particularly rich for this sort of work, since they resist the flat and totalizing messages of more straightforward revelations. "The middle vision offered writers a chance to explore, in the ambiguities of dream experience, anxieties about the ambiguity of literary art."[282] Kruger's emphasis on oneiric middleness as a way to negotiate both the accessible human realm and a more transcendent reality beyond it speaks to some of the core contradictions in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. Here, though, the link sought is not between human perception and divine revelation, but between different truth systems operating simultaneously – those of the past and present, of the dream and waking life.

The trouble is that the dual mechanisms of dreaming and time travel seem to overdetermine one another. As metafictional strategies, they cancel one another out, generating layers of analytical redundance. In the *Breuddwyd*, these two different operations of fictiveness – the time-travel story with its attendant paradoxes, and the dream that has a more-than purely solipsistic or subjective reality—coexist, and the question remains whether it is possible to bring them into meaningful accord. One approach is to maintain the distinctiveness of each. In Joseph Falaky Nagy's account, both mechanisms are true, without need of reconciliation—Rhonabwy encounters "the world of Arthurian characters and their glory as both a distinctly anterior reality and a dream that evaporates upon the dreamer's awakening."[283]

Another option might be to claim that what appear to be two separate layers of metafiction are in fact the same. Carolyn Dinshaw, for instance, suggests that any dream is to some extent a journey into asynchrony—

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[281] Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 134.
[282] Kruger, *Dreaming,* 135.
[283] Nagy, "Hearing," 135.

Dreams of course multiply the possibilities of asynchrony as they interrupt already nonlinear everyday time with their own inscrutable temporalities; they can invert or otherwise alter cause and effect; they can presage the future; they can bring back in figural imagery people and things long gone; they take place in a *now* of indeterminate duration, lasting who knows how long."[284]

Thus the dual awareness of the dream characters, mindful both of Rhonabwy's forward-moving historical time and their own backward-flowing legendary temporality, mirrors the reader's (or audience's) ability to derive real insight from the blatantly fantastic. This in turn calls attention to the ongoing operation by which the past – fundamentally lost, invisible, and dependent on imaginative (re)constructions—nonetheless continues to generate meaning in the present.

The rather trite way of expressing this might be: the past is only accessible through layered fictions. Or, to state that differently: dense fictionality is the *only* way of accessing the past. In the *Breuddwyd*, however, these fictions are both aware of their deep inadequacy in the project of recovery and insistent on the importance of making such an attempt, despite the strictures imposed by the overlaid systems of dream and time travel. The *Breuddwyd*'s uncanniness—the uncanniness of any retold dream, or imagined journey back in time—comes in part from its repositioning of analysis as prior to its originary object. The dream acquires shape and significance in its retelling, while the derived knowledge of a past towards which the time traveler journeys conditions both her destination and her reaction to the world she enters. The danger of this reversal is that preconception might foreclose the possibility of the direct experience which is the goal of such a journey, whether into temporality or consciousness.

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[284] Dinshaw, *How Soon,* 133.

Rhonabwy knows who Arthur is, without being told; the reader knows the dream is significant, before it occurs.

It is tempting to read the dense tangibility and mortal stakes of Rhonabwy's adventure as one way of circumventing this difficulty. The intense description of objects throughout the dream strives towards a kind of material recovery, like that of the cauldron in *Branwen*, which offers a totalizing access to both ancient archaeological past and unknowable future beyond death. But the *Breuddwyd* insists particularly on seeing, on color rather than substance. This static visual fixation recalls Benjamin's fifth thesis on history: "The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again."[285] It also echoes Wittenberg's observation that as time travel narratives compel the reader to piece together "an ultimately unreconstitutable *fabula*, we end up occupying a position so diagrammatic or maplike in its multidimensionality that the usual metaphors of reading position—perspective, point of view, and so on—become virtually literal themselves."[286] As such, "[t]ime travel, even in the form of unillustrated text, is already fundamentally a visual medium, a literal depiction of the textual and paratextual conditions under which viewpoint is constructed."[287]

Arthur's ring, which permits the ever-receding past to exert its force upon Rhonabwy's present, is perhaps the clearest sign in the *Breuddwyd* of how this notion of viewpoint can reconcile the text's different metafictional strands. The magic leaps the boundaries of Rhonabwy's perception, manifesting his remembering of the dream as words on the page. Yet by removing any diegetic indication of *how* Rhonabwy's dream is transferred from the character's subjective experience into the legible text of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, the tale denies us any

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[285] Benjamin, "Concept," 390.
[286] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 135.
[287] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 147.

account of how this remembering has occured. Slotkin is left to posit that the promised *blaenbren*, the "good fortune" that comes to whoever sleeps on the yearling hide, seems to be the dream itself.[288] As readers, we are forced to locate significance there and only there, since "…significance does not emerge in the reality of Rhonabwy's life or the more immediate past of his time."[289] In this reading, the abrupt ending of the tale forecloses the possibility of further effect; holds back the *Breuddwyd*, as Iddog holds back Rhonabwy, from instigating causal chains of unknowable consequence.

This returns us again to the colophon. Slotkin views this passage as drawing attention to how "the whole of it—the whole story, fabula, and text if you will—as being about the status of narratives."[290] This observation chimes with Wittenberg's notions of time-travel tales as inherently metafictional. But Wittenberg, in turn, allows an expanded reading of Slotkin's conclusions. Drawing on the work of Monika Fludernik, Wittenberg notes how in fact, *sjuzhet/story* and *fabula* are always simultaneously produced through narration—unlike the passage of time, which generates real events only subsequently available for narrative, and temporal, manipulation into a legible "history." In fiction, though, while *fabula* seems to be prior, this is only due to the convention of "suspending disbelief," of behaving *as if* fictive texts refer to real, prior things.[291] Wittenberg terms this postulate "*fabular* apriority," "the "mimetic illusion" that the underlying *fabula* is self-consistent, potentially reconstructable, and prior to its ostensible retelling."[292] Without this assumption, the emotional effect of fiction seems diluted— "Indeed, the pathos of any self-conscious narrative or metanarrative is precisely still the

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[288] Slotkin, "Fabula," 93.
[289] Slotkin, "Fabula," 105.
[290] Slotkin, "Fabula," 109.
[291] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 121.
[292] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 124.

originally unselfconscious pastness or truth of *fabula*, its primal historicity," even if this is only set up to be parodied, undermined, or destroyed.[293] The game into which traditional story draws its readers is one in which "*fabula* is not merely prior, but *primal* for any given narrative, a founding fantasy."[294]

Narratives of time travel—as well as dream narratives—trouble this relationship of *fabula*, *sjuzhet*, and *text*. The *sjuzhet* can no longer be traced back to an originary *fabula* – rather it is the *text* or *book*, Wittenberg argues, that

> stands in as the recourse of "reconstitution" that the *fabula* could not provide, becoming essentially the substitute repository for the referential pathos, or maybe its determinate negation. Thus, although the naturalization of *fabular* apriority is rendered impossible by the time travel paradox story, the story does *not* end in a state of chaos or indeterminacy but rather with a fully concrete paratext, a book, which is a medium (in a rather literal sense) through which one may continue to play the dialectical game of reconciling the temporal orders of *sjuzhet* and *fabula*. And thus, strangely enough, the paratext is even more primal than the *fabula* – or stands in behind it, the ultimate postulated object of the cathexis of narrative coherence or truth, the *thing* one must finally always possess in order to read, and to finish reading.[295]

This is made possible explicitly as the time traveler's expanded viewpoint approaches that of the reader, who is left to seek a reconciliation between *sjuzhet* and *fabula* in a textual/paratextual way. The postulate of *fabular* apriority ceases to be persuasive.[296] Instead, "[*f*]*abular* apriority becomes paratextual apriority, and the reading of *sjuzhet* then becomes explicitly the physical action of leafing successively through the page (and/or images) of an

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[293] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 126.
[294] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 127.
[295] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 139-140.
[296] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 144.

actual book in spacetime."[297] And so time travel fiction, by its very nature, "depicts realistically

an explicit crisis of *fabular* apriority and of its motivating drive, the referential pathos."[298]

The insistence that the *Breuddwyd's* colophon places on physical textuality is a ghostly

echo of Wittenberg's argument here, a line of theoretical reasoning entirely anachronistic to the

Middle Ages yet strikingly congruent with the concerns highlighted throughout the dream, and

indeed with Slotkin's analysis of the text's concerns. Through its engagement with the causal

paradoxes of time travel and dream subjectivity, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* foregrounds the potency

of a temporal imagination that allows the radical simultaneity of *fabula*, *sjuzhet*, and *text*. It does

so by rejecting the assumed causal relations between past and present, virtual and real, dreaming

and waking. After all, medieval ideas about dreaming are so tied up with futurity[299] that the

question posed by *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is perhaps less, "What does it mean to dream about the

past?" and more "What does it mean to dream about the past's futures?"

For Rhonabwy, the answer seems to be that it means a suspension between promised

meaning and eventual fulfilment, a lacuna comparable to the "hiatus of history" which Aled

Llion Jones describes as the temporal condition of the medieval Welsh. Such a reading seems to

be endorsed by a couplet in the poetry of Madog Dwygraig, written c. 1370-80, that constitutes

the only other medieval reference to Rhonabwy: "*Ry aniben wyf, eil Rhonabwy / Ryw*

vreudwydyd moel, koel keladwy" ("I am too dilatory, another Rhonabwy, / Some mere dreamer –

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[297] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 145.
[298] Wittenberg, *Time Travel,* 128.
[299] As Kruger writes, "dreams were often thought to foretell the future because they allowed the human soul access to a transcendent, spiritual reality" (Kruger, *Dreaming,* 1-2) This future, in turn, is one that by necessity unspools from a fixed past. Kruger quotes Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* on the complex operation of dreams between past and present - "For dreams are derived from the past in every sense. Nevertheless… by picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past" (quoted on Kruger, *Dreaming,* 3) As mental productions that recombine prior materials into novel configurations, dreams figure in this view as attempts to mold potential futures in familiar likenesses. The question then becomes at what point these reconfigurations achieve the level of revelation.

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secret portent!") O. J. Padel notes that this is transparently a reference to the *Breuddwyd*, and that "perhaps Madog was alluding topically to a work recently composed and circulated."[300] Whether or not it is an attestation of contemporaneity, the couplet provides perhaps the only witness that the *Breuddwyd* was actually *read* in medieval times—and read, for that matter, in very particular ways. Madog sees Rhonabwy as a figure who is *ry aniben*, too slow on the uptake, to transcend his status as oneiric observer. While the exact relationship of this failure to the *koel keladwy*, the secret portent, is unclear, the couplet seems to suggest that Rhonabwy misses some potent sign and so bungles his opportunity to become anything more than a dreamer. Perhaps his failure to participate in the past, rather than merely observing it, prevents a more profound restructuring of the parasitic relationship of history/*fabula* to the present.

Yet Madog's frustration with Rhonabwy's inaction within the dream still leaves open the possibility of the *koel keladwy* manifesting in some other temporality. The text insists, on multiple occasions, that Rhonabwy derives some benefit from his vision. One of the inevitable consequences of traveling back in time is a fracturing of the self, the same multiplication of temporally-constituted identities that leads into contradictions such as the Grandfather Paradox.[301] By virtue of his participation in an alternate past, Rhonabwy becomes heir to this same split consciousness. Yet the result is not the solipsism that Fredric Jameson attributes generally to such narratives.[302] Rhonabwy does not become his own ancestor. Rather, as Slotkin shows, he participates in a past fundamentally altered (perhaps by his own time-jarring

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[300] Padel, *Arthur*, 75. The translation of Madog's lines is Padel's.

[301] This is the paradox, first articulated in several early twentieth-century science fiction tales, that results from imagining a time-traveler going back in time to kill her grandparents. Should she succeed, she would presumably then not be born in the future, and so would not be able to undertake the time-traveling assassination that led to her not being born; while if she *must always fail* (to avoid the paradox), then troubling doubts arise about free will.

[302] "…[T]he ultimate and even stereotypical consummation of the narrative logic of the time-travel tale turns out to be the realisation that I am alone in the world and am therefore logically enough my own ancestor: at which point the temporal and historical universe becomes a solipsistic prison devoid not only of other people but of otherness as such" (Jameson, "In Hyperspace," 19).

presence?) in such a way that it is incapable of producing his own present. Is this past to be understood as an alternate world, the "multiverse" fictions that Jameson posits offer ideological escape from the fundamental conservatism of the time travel narrative?

We do not get any glimpse of the world into which Rhonabwy awakes after his three days' sleep—whether it is the same depressing squalor in which he went to bed, or a new and different reality generated by the weirded past he experiences. If we imagine the former, we might conclude, like Madog Dwygraig, that the dream is haunted by Rhonabwy's failure to take action, to change the miserable present in which he dwells in some truly fundamental way. But in positing the latter, we might suppose that the story he returns with, in all its convolutions, is somehow world-changing in itself—perhaps so radically that we cannot envision what such a change would mean or look like. It is here, perhaps, that the text's politics of refusal assert themselves most forcefully. By denying us any description of Powys post-dreaming, the *Breuddwyd*, like Arthur, crushes the game pieces it has so painstakingly deployed. Yet in doing so, it frees Rhonabwy from the cyclical relationship between dream and reality, present and past, text and interpretation. By confining him and his dream to the physical bounds of the book, it allows both to escape from the hegemonic pressures that the second term in each of these pairs (reality, past, interpretation) exerts on the first (dream, present, text)—a *blaenbren*, a good fortune, if ever there was one.

4. Longing after Timelessness in "Yr Adfail"

A poet named Dafydd comes upon a ruined dwelling. He speaks to it, bemoaning its dilapidation and recounting his memories of a long-ago tryst with his erstwhile beloved within it.

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The ruin responds, trying to account for its wrecked condition by describing the erosive action of wind and storm. But Dafydd questions its story, seeking some other agency that might account for time's ravages. The final couplet of the ruin's response is as devastating as it is enigmatic.

Unlike the other texts considered in this chapter, "Yr Adfail" is a poem rather than a prose narrative. It features a man trying and failing to recover a narrative of the past in the face of existential crisis. The story that the poem's Dafydd seeks is one that will offer a reliable link between his history and his present, and reify each in terms of the other. In this, it resembles the other journeys through uncanny temporalities described in this chapter. Given the thorough familiarity with *cyfarwyddyd* (lore) in evidence throughout Dafydd's corpus,[303] it is possible to read "Yr Adfail" as a lyric reimagining of the attempts to suture a meaningful history to the present moment that animate the texts discussed above, albeit rendered in intensely personal terms.

In form, "Yr Adfail" is a forty-two line *cywydd*, the classical Welsh poetic form comprising chains of seven-syllable couplets, each featuring the complex alliterative/rhyming scheme known as *cynghanedd*, "harmonizing." Its composer is Dafydd ap Gwilym, often asserted to be the preeminent Welsh poet of the Middle Ages. Dafydd seems to have lived during the mid-14th century, though firm details about his life are scant, and almost entirely derived from references in his poetry. His lyrics—some 171 are ascribed to him, in the current edition at

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[303] These include specific references to Branwen ("Gwahanu") and Bendigeidfran ("Moliant Hywel Deon Bangor"), as well as the enchanter Menw, whose adventures are narrated only in *Culhwch ac Olwen* ("Telynores Twyll" and "Trydydd Cywydd Ymryson Dafydd ap Gwilym"). Intriguingly, he also references the Seven Sages of Rome ("Dyddgu"), whose stories are a codicological neighbor of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* in the *Llyfr Coch Hergest*— though this text circulated widely, and the *Breuddwyd*'s highly uncertain dating makes it unclear whether or not it had been written before Dafydd's floruit.

http://dafyddapgwilym.net/[304]—run the gamut from religious verse to formulaic praise of his patrons, from a famous ode to his penis to somber meditations like "Yr Adfail."

But the majority are concerned in one way or another with love. Dafydd's poetic persona loves freely, promiscuously, and often ineptly. A few women's names reappear throughout the corpus—a certain Morfudd, particularly, is often imagined as the closest Dafydd came to a life-long love, and sometimes claimed to be the beloved reminisced about in "Yr Adfail." But many of the women the poet sings of wooing (successfully or otherwise) are anonymous. Like the troubadours of continental Europe, whose influence was becoming felt in Wales by this point, Dafydd frequently engages fanciful messengers—a passing animal, the wind—to convey his words to a distant love interest. On rare occasions, he is successful in his trysts, especially when these occur in the springtime forests, which he praises exuberantly. (A keen observer of nature, Dafydd's persona seems to spend the vast majority of his time outside.) More often, he is thwarted—by the woman's disinterest or scorn, by a jealous husband, by inclement weather, noisy animals, uncouth shepherds, or inconveniently arranged inn furniture. This recurring failure, usually played for rueful comedy, is part of what makes Dafydd such an appealing figure for modern readers. Aware of the ridiculous figure he often cuts, Dafydd nonetheless endures, confident in his masterful verses if in nothing else. These conjure up wit alongside beauty and pathos. In none of his works is this latter more evident than in "Yr Adfail."

R. Geraint Gruffydd situates "Yr Adfail" within a long European tradition, encompassing the Latin works of S. Venantius Fortunatus; the Old English poems *The Ruin* and *The Wanderer*; the Welsh song cycles of Llywarch Hen and Heledd; and the Irish *Acallam na Senorach*,

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[304] Dafydd ap Gwilym, *Cerddi Dafydd ap Gwilym*, ed. and trans. Dafydd Johnston et al. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), www.dafyddapgwilym.net. Sadly, this website does not seem to be currently operational (March 17, 2020).

"Colloquy of the Ancients."[305] But whereas most of these frame the ruin as a symbol of time's passage on the socio-historical level, "Yr Adfail" is intensely personal. It is not about the collapse of a great civilization, but rather the disintegration of the affective ties that bind a fallen present to a poignantly recalled past.[306] In "Yr Adfail," the love-messengers Dafydd seeks are the same mechanisms that thwart him—time, and memory.

Rather than atomizing the poem into artificial sections, I provide it below in its entirety, before proceeding with closer analysis.

> *Tydi y bwth tinrhwth twn*
> *Rhwng y gweundir a'r gwyndwn*
> *Gwae a'th weles dygesynt*
> *Yn gyfannedd gyntedd gynt*
> *Ac a'th wŷl heddiw'n friw frig*   5
> *Dan dy ais yn dŷ ysig*
> *A hefyd ger dy hoywfur*
> *Ef a fu ddydd cerydd cur*
> *Ynod ydd oedd ddiddanach*
> *Nog yr wyd y gronglwyd grach*   10
> *Pan welais pefr gludais glod*
> *Yn dy gongl un deg yngod*
> *Forwyn foneddigfwyn fu*
> *Hoywdwf yn ymgyhydu*
> *A braich pob un gofl fun fudd[307]*   15
> *Yn gwlm amglych ei gilydd*
> *Braich meinir briw awch manod*
> *Goris clust goreuwas clod*
> *A'm braich innau somau syml*

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[305] R. Geraint Gruffydd, "Sylwadau ar Gywydd 'Yr Adfail' gan Dafydd ap Gwilym," in *Ysgrifau Beirniadol XI*, ed. J. E. Caerwyn Williams (Dinbych: Gwasg Gee, 1979), 111.

[306] In this, as mentioned above, it suggests rich comparisons with the *nasīb* tradition in classical Arabic poetry. The multifaceted connections of this nostalgic motif to such topics as history, mysticism, and the non-human form a central thread through Michael A. Sells, "Review: Toward a Multidimensional Understanding of Islam: The Poetic Key (Reviewed Works: *The Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy* by Mustansir Mir, Jarl Fossum; *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* by Suzanne P. Stetkevych; *Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasib* by Jaroslav Stetkevych; *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fāriḍ, His Verse, and His Shrine* by Th. Emil Homerin; *Reorientations: Arabic and Persian Poetry* by Suzanne Stetkevych; *Zaabalawi* by Naguib Mahfuz, Denys Johnson-Davies)," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (Spring, 1996), 145-166.

[307] The edition at dafyddapgwilym.net reads this as "*cof un fydd*," "I will remember her always." The reading here is from Thomas Parry's *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1952).

Dan glust asw dyn glwys disyml   *20*
Hawddfyd gan fasw i'th fraswydd
A heddiw nid ydyiw'r dydd
Ys mau gŵyn gwirswyn gwersyllt
Am hynt a wnaeth y gwynt gwyllt
Ystorm o fynwes dwyrain   *25*
A wnaeth cur hyd y mur main
Uchenaid gwynt gerrynt gawdd
Y deau a'm didyawdd
Ai'r gwynt a wnaeth helynt hwyr
Da nithiodd dy do neithwyr   *30*
Hagr y torres dy esyth
Hudol enbyd yw'r byd byth
Dy gongl mau ddeongl ddwyoch
Gwely ym oedd nid gwâl moch
Doe'r oeddud mewn gradd addwyn   *35*
Yn glyd uwchben fy myd mwyn
Hawdd o ddadl heddiw'dd ydwyd
Myn Pedr heb na chledr na chlwyd
Amryw bwnc ymwnc amwyll
Ai hwn yw'r bwth twn bath twyll   *40*
Aeth talm o waith y teulu
Dafydd a chroes da foes fu.[308]

My translation is somewhat free, but attempts to preserve some of the rhyme and music

of the original without completely betraying the sense.

You bare-assed hovel, broken
Where the pasture meets the moor,
Alas for those, or so they've spoken,
Who once saw comfort at your door,
And see you now, roof broken, all   5
A wreck beneath your lonely eaves.
Time was when your joyous wall
(Pain rebukes me, never leaves)
Held within far happier ways
Than they do now, you homely shell.   10
When last I saw you, bright my praise,
In your corner a fair one fell.
Gentle and shapely and noble, she
And I twined side by side.

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[308] With the exception of line 15, this text follows that at dafyddapgwilym.net.

A blessing, her embracing me—   15
My arms and hers a close knot tied,
Her arm, desire slaked by snow,
Her hand cupped her singer's ear,
And mine, its simple tricks on show,
At the left ear of her without peer.   20
Beneath your boughs the glad had luck,
And today is not that day.
This my grief, a host witchstruck
By the wild wind's pathway.
A storm from deep in the east   25
Cut cruel along the stony wall.
A sighing south wind's rage released
Brought about my beam's downfall.
Did the wind wreak this late destruction?
Last night it winnowed your roof sore.   30
Its pillage ripped your fine construction
The world's a false witch evermore.
Your corner—twice descry my cry—
Was once my bed, not some pig-run.
Yesterday you stood sturdy, high,   35
Snug above my darling one.
There's nothing to deny today,
Saint Peter – rafter, no, nor gate.
Endless illusion thieves minds away.
Is this shattered shed a fraud of fate?   40
Dafydd, this family's gone for quite a spell
Beneath the cross. They lived well.

Period Partitions

 "Yr Adfail" is easy to read as a rather straightforward melancholic dialogue (Gruffydd

even sums it up with a commonplace proverb—"*Sic transit gloria mundi!*"[309]) But it is also a

complex meditation on the traumatic difficulty of salvaging a past that might make sense of

present loss. The poem's fixation on corporeality functions not merely as sentimental elaboration

but as an exploration of the limits of verbal construction, provoked in this case by the failure of

architectural construction. Rather than a strict division between the poet-speaker and the ruined

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[309] Gruffydd, "Sylwadau," 112.

house, the poem actively works to disintegrate these figures into one another, questioning the poetic assemblage of both memory and identity. Dafydd's journey into the past rebuilds neither the structure nor his fractured sense of self. Instead, it provokes a vision of deceptive artifice underlying all earthly experience.

Most if not all modern editions of "Yr Adfail" carefully differentiate two speakers—the poet/Dafydd (lines 1-22 and 29-40) and the ruin itself (lines 23-28 and 41-42). Certainly the shifting points of reference within the poem suggest the validity of this dialogic structure, which is present in numerous other poems within Dafydd's corpus. Yet the manuscripts do not evince any such punctuated structure. As Helen Fulton notes in "Punctuation as a semiotic code: the case of the medieval Welsh *cywydd*," since the poetic manuscripts do not contain punctuation, the "selection and addition" of punctuation is an "editorial choice." But it is a deeply significant one, since it imposes a "semiotic code" on the text, constructing a meaning based largely on an editor's subjective reading. Furthermore, punctuation is a "social semiotic," "subject to change over time."[310] Thus, "punctuation choices construct a view of what medieval Welsh poetry is or should be, how it should be read, and how it should be understood as 'medieval' literature."[311] But even Fulton's analysis foregrounds *reading*, which is likely an anachronism in the context of Dafydd's lyrics. Gwyn Thomas makes passing but important reference to "the fact that the poetry was presented orally and publicly," a medium which "would have enhanced the ambiguity of some statements."[312] The exact specification of which voice speaks at a given moment is precisely the sort of ambiguity that oral poetry could either accentuate (by the seamless melodic

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[310] Helen Fulton, "Punctuation as a semiotic code: the case of the medieval Welsh *cywydd*," *Parergon* 13, no. 2 (January 1996): 21.
[311] Fulton, "Punctuation," 22.
[312] Gwyn Thomas, "Translating Dafydd ap Gwilym," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 18/19 (1998/1999): 228.

blending of adjacent verses) or differentiate (through a change in voice, key, instrumentation, or otherwise.)

The loss of nuance that occurs through the imposition of punctuated structure over Dafydd's text recalls Brian Rotman's fear that alphabetic writing introduces a "hierarchy" of "what's said" over "how what is said is said"; that it essentially banishes "the passion and spirit of speech."[313] Among his key concerns with writing is that it occasions a loss of voice together with affect and agent, giving birth to some terrible and hypothesized "being for whom the loss of prosody is no loss at all; a psychic entity who speaks in a voice without tone, emphasis, irony, distance from itself, humour, doubleness, affect, pain or the possibility of such things; an absent, invisible, bodiless being who/which has presided over the writing of speech in the West since its inception."[314]

"Yr Adfail" is deeply concerned with voice, not only the interplay of voices but their physical production, their affective relation with the rupture that produces them. Given this context, it seems particularly important to strive against the pressures of Rotman's spectre. In the transcription of the *cywydd* song, whose pauses, emphases, and inflections of speech may have been originally subordinated to meter and melody, might a lack of punctuation—or, at the very least, of quotation marks—be a step towards undoing alphabetic hegemonies of meaning? What such an approach produces is not a reapportioning of the "lines" between the poet and the ruin, but rather a realization that the difference between them is subjectively conditioned, and hides an essential unity. Undivided, the text is capable of reproducing interpretive diversity that supports the intentional ambiguity (even the occasionally antonymic vocabulary) of Dafydd's work. And

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[313] Brian Rotman, "The Alphabetic Body," *Parallax* 8: 97.
[314] Rotman, "Alphabetic," 98.

this refusal to cleave apart the two (or more) voices of the poem mirror's the poet's situation, trapped between interior reflection on the past and the exterior ruin that is the present.

This suspension is present from the poem's opening lines. Gruffydd glosses the opening situation of the structure, *"Rhwng y gweundir a'r gwyndwn,"* as meaning between *"y tir gwyllt a'r tir pori"* ("wild land and grazing land"), *"yn agos i'r byd gwyllt a oedd mor bwysig yng ngolwg Dafydd ac eto o fewn cyrraedd i gymdeithas dynion"* ("close to the wild world that was more important in Dafydd's eyes, and also within reach of human society.")[315] Yet this is an undeniably lonely situation. The liminal zone in which Dafydd stands and observes the ruin is one of exile from societal comforts, including the strict delineation between wilderness and cultivation. In fact, the poem suggests, these two environments differ from one another only through time and circumstance. The wild land may be cleared and tamed to human use; it may also, like the primordial *gweilgi* in *Branwen*, encroach upon and lay claim to the abandoned artifacts of civilization.

Porous Bodies

Highlighting this marginal setting reinforces a close association between the two primary figures of "Yr Adfail." Both employ poetic speech (voicing thought in elaborate *cywydd* meter), both are aging, both are at the mercy of time and the elements. Despite what Gruffydd notes as *"atgasedd y bardd tuag at y lle,"* ("the poet's hatred towards the place"),[316] they are undeniably identified with one another. Both have held a beloved in their embrace, in the exhilaration of youth, and both are painfully aware that *"heddiw nid ydyw'r dydd,"* "today is not that day." Before it acquires explicit voice, the building acquires anatomical features: in the first line, it is

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[315] Gruffydd, "Sylwadau," 112.
[316] Gruffydd, "Sylwadau," 112.

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"*tinrhwth*" "open-butted," "open-tailed," or, more colorfully, "bare-assed"; in line 3, it has *ais*, which Bromwich explains means 'ribs' but here refers to roof-lathes.

This body-constructing vocabulary acquires special resonance as Dafydd begins to describe the *teg*, the "fair one" with whom he knew happier times when the ruin was whole. The repetition of *braich* ("arm") and *clust* ("ear") is a consummate display of skill, a poetic weaving that mirrors the intertwined bodies that the poet-character recalls. Yet they also insist on the corporeality of those memories, on their entanglement with real referents whose present meaning can perhaps be reclaimed through invocation of their past. These were bodies that felt and touched, and even if that touch and the feeling that animated it have left no trace, surely, Dafydd pleads, the bodies themselves had a validity that endures. Dafydd's song moves from sight to touch, seeking to move beyond the scopocentric limitations of memory.

But the disintegration of the physical then becomes a dangerous challenge to the permanence of memory. The ruin's speech, growing out of (rather than taking over from) Dafydd's second person address somewhere around line 23, is a challenge to the specific validity of human voice and memory. Yet this transition is anything but clear-cut. "*Ys mau gŵyn geirswyn gwersyllt*," the first line ascribed to the building, is considerably more ambiguous than Roger Sherman Loomis lets on with his translation, "Lament is mine (the bewitched speech of a refuge)." Rachel Bromwich gives "Mine is the grief (an army under spells)," whereas A. Cynfael Lake has "My complaint, strong enchantment of a host"—which together clarify nothing other than that Loomis' clear attribution of the lament to the refuge is itself a clarification, and not necessarily a justified one. Gruffydd identifies this line as "*yr ymadrodd gogleisiol yn araith yr adfail*" "the vexing utterance in the ruin's rhetoric," though he offers a paraphrase—the wind

passes "*fel ymdaith rhyw fyddin hud-a-lledrith*" ("like the passage of some army of enchantment")[317]

Perhaps the most "vexing" word here is *gwersyllt*, which can mean both an army and the place that the army camps, fortifies, or protects—or for that matter, has camped, has protected formerly. Etymologically, the *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* derives this from *gwer/gwor-* + *syllu*, "over-watching," "*h.y. lle manteisiol i weld y wlad oddi ymgylch*" ("that is, an advantageous place from which to see the surrounding country").[318] While most immediately suggestive of a protective watchtower, the word's usage indicates that it was also applied to armies on the offensive—who, no less than defenders, would find it advantageous to survey the landscape from a strong position.

The translator's difficulty lies in choosing between opposites that the poet does not need to resolve: destructive force, on the one hand, or the cold hollow where a great force has been but has now moved on. *Gwersyllt* confounds agency while also recentering the poem's concern on time, understood simultaneously as the rampaging army that destroys all in its path and as the battered artifacts that alone testify to time's passage. Both suggest a history but are unable, themselves, to narrate it. And here it is worth pointing out that ruin's *gŵyn*, which all the translators cited above give as some variation of "grief" or "complaint," can also have a sense of "desire" or "longing."

But beyond this verbal ambiguity, there is the additional issue that the line "*Ys mau gŵyn geirswyn gwersyllt*" could very plausibly belong to the human character, at least at this hinge moment. To the auditor of the sung poem, there is no immediate clue that the voice has switched (especially to a speaker as surprising as the ruin itself). Grief, complaint, and desire all belong to

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[317] Gruffydd, "Sylwadau," 113.
[318] *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, s.v. "gwersyllt," http://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html.

Dafydd-the-speaker as rightfully as they do to the structure. And though the metaphor is perhaps a little more stretched, he is also conceivably either a *geirswyn gwersyllt* himself, a bewitched and empty campground, or subject to the cursed assault of time and chance. In fact, the first unambiguous reference that the ruin makes to itself does not come until line 28—"*Y deau a'm didoawdd,*" "brought about my beam's downfall," though any of the previous metaphors linking architectural features to body parts could easily run in the opposite direction.

Cosmic Storms

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of the speaking ruin is its lack of memory. It does not share in any of its human interlocutor's reminiscences. Incapable of reconstituting the past into narrative, it is fixated instead on the storm that has shattered it, on the wind—a theme which the poet character immediately takes up in his response. The word *gwynt*, wind, occurs three times between lines 24 and 29, though its first appearance is also an echo of that near-homophone *gŵyn*, grief or desire, in the previous line. In a very literal sense, the wind is exactly what gives the ruin voice, whistling over and through its shattered structure. At only a slightly higher level of abstraction, the wind is time and fate—"weathering" that wrenches the past violently forward through time.

Yet the poem goes further than this simple attribution. Instead, the wind provokes an existential shipwreck in Dafydd's character. "Did the wind wreak this late destruction?" he asks, questioning exactly the account the ruin has given. In the poet's response, Gruffydd detects "*nodyn o goegni yma sy'n troi'n rhywbeth tebycach i hysteria'n nes ymlaen*" ("an indication of spite [or contempt] that will turn into something more resembling hysteria later on.") This leads to "*y llinell allweddol*" ("the key line"), "*Hudol enbyd yw'r byd byth,*" which Gruffydd glosses as

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"*dewin peryglus yw'r byd bob amser*" ("The world is each time a deadly enchanter").[319] Earthly existence, in other words, is capable of transforming places so thoroughly that the memories associated with them are undermined and lose all referents. This leads to what Gruffydd calls "*yr esgynfa ofidus*" ("the devastating climax"),[320] "*Ai hwn yw'r bwth twn bath twyll*?" ("Is this shattered hut some sort of treachery?") Dafydd's anxiety here produces a questioning of all earthly ontology. He imagines the world as a maelstrom of fatal deception, of which the ruin is both nothing more and nothing less than the clearest sign. Existence in time, portrayed here as the tormented consciousness of a rogue wizard, is fundamentally a trap from which Dafydd is unable to imagine a meaningful escape.

It is this despair that leads to the poem's devastating final couplet: "*Aeth talm o waith y teulu / Dafydd a chroes da foes fu*" (Dafydd, this family's gone for quite a spell / Beneath the cross. They lived well.") Unfortunately, these lines also present serious challenges of interpretation—Gruffydd openly admits to their difficulty.[321] His interpretation proceeds by following Thomas Parry's suggestion that *mynd* [past tense, *aeth*] *â chroes* is the same as *mynd dan (ei) grwys*—that is, *marw*, "to die." *Talm*, however, is both *cyfran, ysbaid* ("portion, span, time period") and "*llawer (o bobl)*" ("many people"). This sets Gruffydd up to tackle the multivalent word *teulu*, meaning "family, household," and in medieval Wales, also, a lord's personal warband. Gruffydd proposes instead that here it is being used euphemistically for the fairy host of Gwyn ap Nudd, leader of the Wild Hunt. These beings, he notes, "*oedd yn fodau llawer mwy bygythiol yng ngolwg Dafydd na'r creaduriaid bychain tlws a boblogeiddiwyd gan lên gwerin diweddarach*" ("were much more threatening in Dafydd's eyes than the curious little

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[319] Gruffydd, 113.
[320] Gruffydd, 113.
[321] Gruffydd, "Sylwadau," 113.

creatures popularized in later folk literature.") Indeed, these fair folk were frequently seen as conveyors of phantom funerals and omens of death. Thus Gruffydd proposes that in its final words, the ruin notes how many of its former inhabitants, "*oherwydd gweithgarwch yr ysbrydion gelyniaethus*, *wedi mynd i'w bedd* ("through the craft/labor of hostile spirits, have gone to their grave.")[322]

In this conception, the *teulu,* the fairy host, becomes roughly equivalent to Anglo-Saxon *wyrd*, to time and fate as hostile, incomprehensible entities. Gruffydd even proposes that such an ascription of agency to shadowy and malevolent forces was perhaps particularly attractive in the era of the Black Death, to which he dates the poem.[323] But Rachel Bromwich and others have rejected this reading as too conjectural, and preferred the more straightforward understanding— the *teulu* is the "family" who formerly occupied the ruin, that is, the "household" comprised of Dafydd-the-speaker and his lover in times past.

Yet remembering the *geirswyn gwersyllt* of line 23, and what we know of Dafydd-the-poet's penchant for wordplay, it seems a disservice to the poem's complexity to reject either reading. Indeed, the double meaning may be key to the poetic vision. A single word encompasses both comforting domesticity and savage otherness, family as the locus of memory and family as the atavistic and unfathomable curse. The *teulu* is very much the Freudian *unheimlich*—family that gives birth to bodies and family that subsumes them. Note also that it is here, in the final line, that Dafydd-the-speaker receives his name. It is bestowed upon him by his interlocuter, just as he bestowed a name upon the ruin in the poem's first line.

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[322] Gruffydd, "Sylwadau," 114.
[323] Gruffydd, "Sylwadau," 115.

<u>Locating the Past</u>

Gruffydd, notes, "*Eto nid ar nodyn o anobaith y daw'r cywydd i ben*" ("Yet the poem

does not end on a note of hopelessness"). He takes the goodness alluded to in the final line as a

form of resistance to "*grym y galluoedd tywyll*" and "*darfodedigrwydd naturiol dyn*" ("the force

of dark powers" and "the natural transience of man.")[324] But the stark past tense of the final *fu*,

"was," seems to consign such goodness to an irretrievable past. Its repeated conjuration or

enunciation, through repeated performance, only serves to further distance it from its referent.

Singing of the past, as testified by the cyclical elegies of *Y Gododdin*, reifies its absence.[325]

In this, "Yr Adfail" suggests its complex relationship to the classical trope of the *locus*

amoenus and its successor in medieval troubadour poetry, the *loc aizi*. This is an idealized poetic

space—often a garden or bower—that is "everlasting, abolishes all distance between lover and

beloved, and transcends ordinary time and space." Though outlined in spatial terms, the *loc aizi*

exerts itself most powerfully in chronological terms, "denoting an extratemporal moment where

love is not only ever-proximate but also everlasting"[326] This moment may be regarded, in terms

reminiscent of Eliade, as "an eternal present of new beginnings… in which the lover may return

to the source of his life and being."[327] Dafydd's ruin, however, makes this imagined site all too

literal. Through the physical archaeology of the shattered building and the permanence of love's

loss, it reveals the conceptual lie between notions of the eternal and everlasting. Everything is

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[324] Gruffydd, "Sylwadau," 115.

[325] In its bleak reflection on mortality, on the curious half-life constituted by memory, "Yr Adfail" reads like an eerie precursor of Ambrose Bierce's "An Inhabitant of Carcosa," in which a narrator wandering through a desolate graveyard is revealed to be the spirit of a dead person buried there, former inhabitant of a long-destroyed city. In addition to the similar setting and atmosphere, some of Bierce's lines are strikingly similar to Dafydd's—"Was it not indeed *all* an illusion of my madness?" almost glosses the two lines "*Amryw bwnc ymwnc amwyll / Ai hwn yw'r bwth twn bath twyll*" (Ambrose Bierce, "An Inhabitant of Carcosa," in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (New York: Lovell, Corvell, & Company, 1891, 244).

[326] Charlotte Gross, "Studies in Lyric Time-Structure: Dreams, Visions, and Reveries," *Tenso* 2, no. 1, (Autumn 1986): 25.

[327] Gross, "Time Structure," 28.

time-bound, and lyric repetition is not a vehicle for return but rather an index of ever-increasing distance.

This gap also interposes a breakdown in referential communication. Among the more striking aspects of "Yr Adfail," in contrast to the rest of Dafydd's corpus, is its lack of allusions. Dafydd's other poems are studded with references to classical mythology, Welsh and Irish legendary tradition, continental romances, and Biblical tales; to myriad places in Wales, and occasionally beyond; to contemporary figures and technologies; and, most consistently, to the figures of Dafydd's personal mythology (whatever their status as "real" people)—Morfudd, Dyddgu, and so on. But "Yr Adfail" is strikingly bare of all of these. Its only proper nouns are "Saint Peter" (in the context of an oath) and "Dafydd"—the poet's own name, thrown back at him by the ruin in the devastating final couplet. It shrinks the poetic world to the observer and object, then undoes the hierarchical relationship between these entities.

But by inviting the artifact into his meditation, Dafydd perhaps breaks free of pure solipsistic reflection. In its interplay of voices, "Yr Adfail" questions the hierarchical direction of prosopopoeia, the notion of creator bestowing voice, name, and being on a mute object. It suggests a greater equality and complexity to the relationship. Might the physical testament of the object somehow stir voice, name, and being into the shape of a creator? And might the connection between these transcend simplistic dialogue to approach something more symphonic—a denial of division in favor of wind-pierced openness, or a transcendence of anguish that undoes meaning in order to posit a poetic unity of past, present, artist, and object?

It should be noted that other readings of "Yr Adfail" are available. Patrick Ford notes that the title is a 20th century innovation, bestowed by Thomas Parry and not original to the text.

Noting how titles often "co-opt our readings" of texts,[328] Ford proposes that the idea of "a ruined homestead" is out of keeping with Dafydd's usual themes. Rather, he identifies the poem as Dafydd's "lament for his ruined woodland bower."[329] Noting that Dafydd's trysts in the wilderness routinely succeed, whereas those within "a built structure" invariably fail, Ford imagines the poem as essentially seasonal in nature, lamenting winter's depredations while longing for spring's return.[330] Particularly, he challenges the reading of *mur main* in line 26 as "stone wall," proposing instead "slender; finely woven; pointed" "wall," though he suggests that "wall" "is used metonymically," like other architectural terms, "for Dafydd's *ty yn y coed* ["house in the wood."]"[331] He musters convincing parallels in other poems of Dafydd's that compare woodland bowers to manmade structures,[332] and notes that winter was the season when the pigs Dafydd complains of would have been sojourning in the wilderness.[333] This in turn allows him a considerably more whimsical reading of the last lines, in which the "former 'inhabitants'" who are dead are not people but "leaves, flora," perhaps conceived as leaving on pilgrimage or crusade, only to return in the spring.[334]

But Ford's analysis is ultimately unconvincing in its attempt to downplay the devastation Dafydd witnesses as being merely temporary and seasonal. The latest edition of the poems, dafyddapgwilym.net, preserves the title "Yr Adfail," and does not adopt Ford's reading of *mur main*, providing "*muriau cerrig*" in its Modern Welsh paraphrase and maintaining "stone walls"

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[328] Patrick K. Ford, "*Yr Adfail:* Dafydd ap Gwilym's Ruined Bower," *Studia Celtica* XLI (2007): 173. This observation recalls Jerome McGann's theory of how "bibliographical codes" shape reading practices (Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 60.)
[329] Ford, "*Adfail*," 174.
[330] Ford, "*Adfail,*" 175 and 180-181.
[331] Ford, "*Adfail*," 175-176.
[332] Ford, "*Adfail*," 180.
[333] Ford, "*Adfail*," 181.
[334] Ford, "*Adfail*," 183.

in its English translation.[335] Ford's analysis likewise leaves open the question of what, exactly, is speaking when the ruin replies—the poem links this sound with the movement of the wind against, across, or through *some broken thing*, not merely empty space. There is, in any event, a structural unity that possesses a voice.

But even accepting Ford's vision of a barren winter bower need not radically affect a reading of the poem. Metaphorically, the space *is* a dwelling (that is also, furthermore, a being); and the ravages of time it has undergone are those that besiege memory as well as the human body. If there is a seasonality here, it is one with little use for "the promise of spring's return." Ford's analysis, though, is useful in positing that the site eulogized in "Yr Adfail" is fundamentally defined by, and composed of, memory. An entity so constituted, Dafydd imagines, would itself be incapable of recollection. Yet that denial might be the only possible route to break free of the delusions that constitute worldly existence.

So while "Yr Adfail" does not envision a temporal journey as directly as the other texts considered in this chapter, its exploration of the relations between past and current selves ask the same questions that David Wittenberg identifies as key to the historical journeys of time travel— "How, quite literally, is the past event reconstructed by or from the present? How is it discovered, or made, to be "real"? *When* is it caused?"[336] Dafydd does not answer these questions so much as he imagines a space in which they could be raised without the hierarchical anxieties imposed by classic accounts of temporality. Like Gwrhyr's journey into nonhuman chronologies, Bendigeidfran's corporeal bridging, or Rhonabwy's dream of a past restructured as a future, Dafydd's meditation permits a reconsideration of time—one that recognizes the existential pain of *distensio animi* and the necessity of living through, and beyond, history.

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[335] "Yr Adfail," http://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.htm.
[336] Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 13.

Conclusion

Pasts and Passages

This chapter has traced an interest in weirded temporalities through a set of medieval Welsh texts. It began by rooting this fascination with heterochrony in the prophetic poem *Armes Prydein*. As Welsh identity coalesced around opposition to ongoing English (*Saesneg*, "Saxon") encroachment in the last centuries of the first millennium CE, *Armes Prydein* made sense of this dispossession by depicting the present as an empty and unnarratable interval between lost past and messianic future. For those trapped in this voided 'now,' meaning could be enacted only through the unearthing of scattered histories that might in turn give birth to the always-deferred moment of prophetic realization.

This project of recovery is both dramatized and troubled by accounts of journeys into other modes of time. In *Culhwch ac Olwen*, the achievement of a series of impossible quests shatters the contained chronotope of Arthurian legend, which spills over into antediluvian prehistory and apocalyptic endtimes. *Branwen ferch Llŷr* attempts to bridge the gaps between past and present, only for these efforts to falter before cyclical violence that demands to be understood as the foundation of history. Yet in its insistence on the subjective and affective dimensions of temporality, *Branwen* protests the pull of any singular, teleological narrative.

The uncanny temporal engagements of these two texts build towards the explicit time travel of the later *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, in which a dream of return to a heroic past undermines the hierarchical structures upon which the present is built, up to and including narrative and its textual encoding. Lastly, "Yr Afdail" questions whether memory is capable of constructing anything from the ruined remnants of long-ended times.

All of these texts display an interest in the speculative concerns that, modern critics have argued, chronofictions inevitably foreground. By drawing their characters into supernatural encounters with time, they formulate thought experiments of daring complexity. What would it mean if the world could end in one of two equally likely but mutually exclusive ways? What if time moved differently in one place than in another? What would it entail to travel back in time, or for reality to reveal itself as responsive to a simulation? What would it mean for an entity to be composed solely of memory? In each case, these implicit questions are not answered outright but rather explored through deceptively concise narration and lyric.

For theories of time-travel fiction that tie the genre's development strictly to the context of modern English, French, and American imperial capitalism, the suggestion of chronofictions arising among a peripheral, fractious nation of medieval subalterns is problematic. For Wittenberg, there is a distinct colonial conservatism inherent in the time traveler's return to a safely-preserved, unaltered future.[337] But as I have argued, texts like *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* do not guarantee such a return. They demand instead an openness to imagining other pasts, even as they leave unspoken the alternate futures into which such pasts might cohere. As such, they gesture towards a speculative fiction that is not smugly content with idle fantasies but rather actively engaged in the search for an escape from the horrors that hegemonic accounts insist are inevitable: squalor and war, displacement and genocide, Camlan and the concentration camps eerily presaged by *Branwen*'s iron house. Aled Llion Jones thus argues for the radical potential of asynchrony via the prophetic text, which "exists as a recurrent gap in the 'dominant discourse' of history."[338] Likewise, Fredric Jameson wonders if the infinite timelines of the multiverse as explored in time-travel fictions can "open up the sealed world of the earlier generic moment and

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[337] Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 170.
[338] Jones, *Darogan*, 236.

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offer counterfactual release from the tyranny of a fixed past and a collective destiny foretold."[339] Each in its own way, these texts deny the uncomplicated relationship between past and present that officially sanctioned histories demand. They question, complicate, and in some cases explode the notion that any imagination of past events can, or should, accumulate into an entity resembling the now.

Time is never explicitly embodied in the core texts of this chapter. Though it shadows the fated Ysbaddaden and works its ravages through the Twrch Trwyth, coheres around the immense Arthur at his Bergmanesque game board and whistles ghost-like through Dafydd's ruin, it does not assume tangible shape. But as mentioned above, in the *Historia Brittonum* and its descendant, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, time assumes the form of two dragons, one red and one white, battling for mastery over a yet-unlived history. The Red Dragon (*Y Ddraig Goch*) remains the national emblem of Wales, encoding a sense less of warlike ferocity than of time's monstrous power. As the next chapter argues, this linking of history's vicissitudes to serpentine chimeras surfaces in another medieval literary culture in which origin and identity, loss and the legendary past, represent intractably intertwined concerns.

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[339] Jameson, "In Hyperspace," 19.

Chapter II

Hostile Others:

What Did It Mean to Battle the Draconic in the Medieval Iranian World?

Introduction

How to Kill a Paradigm: Towards a Polyphyletic Teratology

Abolfazl Mohammad ben Hosayn Bayhaqi was a thirty-one-year-old court secretary when his lord, Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin, returned from devastating the great Shaivite temple of Somnath, Gujarat, in 416 SH (1025-26 CE). In addition to an immense amount of plunder, valued at twenty million dinars,[1] Mahmud brought home a rather more curious trophy—the freshly-killed remains of a mythical beast. In one of the fragments that have survived from his monumental history of the Ghaznavid kings, written decades after Mahmud's expedition, Bayhaqi records:

> *Soltān beh vaqt-e morāje'at az Sumnāt yeki az shekareh-dārān-e u azhdahā-i bozorg rā bekosht va pust-e ān birun keshidand tul-e ān si gaz bud va 'arz-e ān chahār gaz agar kasi rā in qabul nayoftad beh qal'eh-ye Ghaznin ravā va ān pust keh az dar bar mesāl-e shādorvān āvikhteh ast bebinad.*[2]
>
> (When the Sultan was returning from Somnath, one of his falconers slew a huge *azhdahā* and took off its skin. The length of it was thirty yards and the girth of it was four yards.[3] If anyone refuses to accept this, let him go to the palace of Ghaznin and see that skin, which is hung beside the gate like a tapestry.")

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[1] A crude calculation suggests this to be well over four billion dollars in today's terms, simply according to the modern value of the gold by weight.

[2] Abolfazl Mohammad ben Hosayn Beyhaqi, quoted by 'Alā'addin 'Atā-Malek Jovayni, in Mansur Rastegār-Fasā'i, *Azhdahā dar asātir-e Irān* (Shirāz: Enteshārāt-e Dāneshgāh-e Shirāz, 1365 [1986]), 46.

[3] The Persian word is *gaz*, and like all traditional measurements it varied widely across time and space. Quoted equivalents range from 24 to 41 inches.

Bayhaqi prided himself on his rationality, his emotional distance from his subjects, his critical approach to historical sources, and his rejection of hearsay.[4] Like many a modern-day purveyor of fine art or sober history, he bemoaned popular taste for the fantastic, lamenting that "*bishtar-e mardom-e 'āmmeh ān-and keh bātel-e momtane' rā dust-tar dārand chun akhbār-e div va pari va ghul-e biyābān va kuh va daryā*"[5] ("most of the common people are those who prefer impossible falsehood, like stories of the *div* and *pari*, and the ghouls of the desert and mountain and sea.[6]") In his report of the *azhdahā*, Bayhaqi is careful to head off his prospective readers' doubts by an appeal to the physical evidence of the monster, still adorning the royal palace. Those hoping to recover modern standards of scientific plausibility for the medieval historian might argue that Sultan Mahmud's army encountered Indian pythons (*Python molurus*), common enough to this day in Gujarat but likely exotic and even monstrous for natives of the central Afghan highlands. While these snakes are generally closer to three yards than thirty in length, the royal huntsmen may have stretched the skin of their prize to achieve a more dramatic specimen, or even stitched together the remains of several pythons.

Yet such an explanation elides the fact that Bayhaqi's account, despite its careful measurements and insistence on tangible proof, remains indebted to epic tropes—the heroic journey eastwards, the strange creature encountered there, the retrieval of the talismanic skin. Most troubling of all is the name he uses for the animal. When Bayhaqi was writing, *azhdahā* was not a neutral term of taxonomy, but rather a loaded literary coinage. The word *azhdahā*

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[4] Ḡ.-Ḥ. Yūsofī, "Bayhaqī, Abu'l-Fażl," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, III/8 (1988): 889-894, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bayhaqi-abul-fazl-mohammad-b.
[5] 'Ali Akbar Fayyāz*, ed., *Tārikh-e Bayhaqi* (Mashhad: Dāneshgāh-e Mashhad, 1350 [1971]), 666.
[6] *Daryā* in New Persian can refer to any large body of water, including lakes and rivers, alongside its modern usage of "sea" (though this meaning is also closest to the word's etymology.) Translation is further complicated by the vague geography of the epics. I have almost always kept it as "sea" in my translations, though in many places, "river" is perhaps equally appropriate.

enmeshes Bayhaqi's chronicle in the same mythopoetic mode that the epic poet Ferdowsi had inaugurated only a few decades before in his *Shāhnāmeh*. Ordinary wildlife becomes enlisted in ritualized narrative, rearranging hierarchies of belief around taxidermic evidence. Wonder adheres to the detached skin, before refracting out onto the heroic Sultan, the exotic East, and the natural world in general. This last is transformed from a quotidian surrounding to the site of what later writers would term *'ajā'ib al-makhluqāt wa gharā'ib al-mawjudāt*—"the wonders of created things and the bizarrenesses of beings," physical manifestations of the Divine's infinite creative capacity to exceed human expectation.

In Bayhaqi's slain serpent, we can see how battles with the *azhdahā* express an anxiety about the relationship between humans and their environment. By environment, I mean both the natural world as it is conceived in modern terms, and a broader awareness encompassing what it means to be human within time and space. Similar anxieties arise in draconic discourse from other cultures, perhaps nowhere more directly than in the Old English *Beowulf*. In that poem, the present's predatory engagement with the archaeological past—the looting of an ancient burial mound—unleashes a reptilian doom upon the kingdom of the Geats, consigning their polity in turn to pastness.[7] While Persian literature contains nothing quite so explicit, it continually employs the figure of the hostile *azhdahā* to trouble the stability of humanity's cosmic positioning. The appearance of such creatures instigates a rearrangement of ecological and/or temporal order. In this, they enact the Deleuzian role of the animal as a "vector of becoming." Incorporating both primal savagery and civilizational technology, the *azhdahā* embodies a chimeric amalgam of eras. In fighting these beasts, the hero often becomes himself draconic, and so reinserts monstrous energy back into the society he has ostensibly protected.

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[7] Kevin Kiernan, ed., *Electronic Beowulf*, 4th online edition (University of Kentucky & The British Library, 2015), lines 2271ff.

This chapter examines hostile encounters between humans and reptilian monsters termed *azhdahā* (usually translated as "dragon," though I will aim to trouble this equivalence) within classical Persian verse epic. The polyvalent meanings of the *azhdahā* in other medieval Persian contexts, such as the visual arts, architecture, astrology, medicine, magic, and the natural sciences (to say nothing of other literary genres, which encompass everything from friendly beasts helping wayward princes to Islamic riffs on the Edenic serpent) no doubt impinge upon these scenes, and will be referred to as occasion demands. However, the argument here posits that depictions of confrontation between human warriors and monsters identified as *azhdahā* in classical Persian epic largely are not ultimately reliant on meaning imported from other contexts, however much these scenes remain enmeshed in an ongoing dialogue with these contexts. The same is true in a broader comparative sense: elucidating these combats in Persian epic does not depend on drawing parallels to instances of dragon-slaying in ancient Semitic or medieval European texts. Whereas the tendency in existing scholarship has generally been to assimilate all of these battles, whenever possible, into a universal monomyth, this study asserts that such comparisons are least fruitful when bent towards a quixotic search for origins, and most useful when they pay careful attention to the deployment of specific tropes in specific places and times.

In the remainder of this introduction, I outline the contours of the Persian epic genre to which the core texts of this chapter belong. I then examine the etymology of the word *azhdahā*, in addition to problematizing the genealogy often assigned to this creature by those seeking to link it to a postulated "Indo-European dragon." Instead, I propose the greater utility of theoretical frames invoked by modern theorists of the monstrous and the weird. Drawing on these approaches, I conclude the introduction with an overview of the teratological landscape of

Persian epic, and how the *azhdahā* compares to other inhabitants of its particular literary

ecosystem.

The Persian Epic

Before confronting the epic's *azhdahā* directly, it is important to establish their literary

context. The "classical Persian verse epic" that forms the generic focus of this chapter is a type

of narrative poetry in the New Persian language that relates heroic stories from the past—

originally, and often, the distant pre-Islamic past.[8] Works bearing similar generic features but

celebrating contemporary rulers became reasonably common as well, but for reasons considered

in this chapter, actual *azhdahā* are rare if not nonexistent in these poems. While modern Persian

literary criticism describes the epic genre as *hamāseh* (from Arabic *ḥamāsa*, "heroism"),

medieval litterateurs do not use this term, instead referring generally to *dāstān* ("story, legend,

tale," though these might be in either verse or prose) and *masnavi*, "couplet poems," which could

be on any number of subjects. Couplets (that is, verse in which the first half of the line rhymes

with the second half throughout the poem, forming the pattern AA / BB / CC / …xx) are

contrasted here with the (originally Arabic) monorhyme pattern (that is, AA / BA / CA / …xA,

used in other, generally shorter verse genres such as the *qasida* and *ghazal*), since the regular

change of the rhyme permits the development of a longer story with varied incidents.

However, other formal features beyond terminology help define the genre. These include

the near-ubiquitous *motaqāreb* meter (˘-- / ˘-- / ˘-- / ˘-, traditionally expressed as *faʿulon faʿulon*

fa'ulon fa'ul), pioneered for this purpose by Abu Mansur Daqiqi (d. 977 CE) and firmly established by its use in Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh*. The widespread employment of this meter allowed a modular approach, whereby independent tales could become seamlessly combined and/or attached to pre-existing works without a break in poetic flow. Ferdowsi himself used this technique, incorporating one thousand lines of Daqiqi's unfinished poem into his own opus. While not as diagnostic, the use of *-nāmeh* (from Middle Persian *nāmag*, "book, letter") for the titles of epic works is another common feature, with the first element often the central hero's name (*Garshāspnāmeh*, *Farāmarznāmeh*, *Borzunāmeh*, etc.) but not always (most prominently, *Shāhnāmeh*, "king-book.") Another popular definition is topical—Persian epics are said to deal with *razm o bazm*, "fighting and feasting" or, more loosely, "peril and pleasure." That is, their heroes engage both in the luxuries of court life, including food, drink, music, and lovemaking; and in feats of arms, both individual duels and grand battles, against human or nonhuman foes.

Despite numerous claims to the contrary, there are no surviving texts of epic verse narrative in Old, Middle, or New Persian[9] until the 10th century creations of Mas'udi Marvzi

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[9] The convention of dividing the history of the Persian language into Old, Middle, and New periods was established by European philologists of the 19th century, analogizing the language's developmental stages to those of the Indo-European languages of Europe. As such, it ignores both emic accounts of the language and the complex processes of linguistic unification and fragmentation that have occurred across the past three millennia. At the same time, the convention remains useful for broad literary-historical purposes. **Old Persian** (*Pārsa-*) is an inflected Indo-Iranian (and thus Indo-European) language known from the cuneiform royal inscriptions of the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550-330 BCE); only about 450 words survive, not counting those which can be inferred from comparative linguistics and Greek reports. **Middle Persian** (*Pārsig*) is a more capacious term, referring to languages spoken under the Arsacid (247 BCE-224 CE) and Sasanian Dynasties (224 CE-651 CE) and surviving in coins and inscriptions from these eras, but with longer texts composed somewhat later by the Manichaeans of Central Asia and by Zoroastrian refugees to India after the Islamic conquests. The script employed in these Zoroastrian manuscripts is often called *Pahlavi*, and is derived from court Aramaic. Middle Persian is characterized by, among other traits, a reduction of the Old Persian inflectional and conjugational systems and a loss of noun gender; these traits are retained in **New Persian** (*Fārsi*), which refers to the language written in a modified Arabic script and containing a significant amount of Arabic vocabulary that emerged amongst the Islamic courts of the Eastern Iranian world by the mid-9th century CE. The oldest surviving works of significant length in this idiom include the poetic corpus of Abu 'Abdollah Ja'far ibn Mohammad Rudaki (d. 940/41 CE) and the translation of Ṭabari's *History* undertaken by Abu ʿAli Mohammad Balʿami (d. c. 997 CE), both of which are readily comprehensible to modern speakers of Iranian Farsi, Afghan Dari, and (if transliterated into Cyrillic) Tajik Tajiki. In contrast to the Western Iranian languages outlined above, **Avestan** or Zend refers to a pair of Eastern Iranian languages. One is almost certainly older than Old Persian, its developmental stage perhaps parallel to the Sanskrit of the *Ṛgveda*. These languages were preserved in

(lost, except for three lines[10]) and Daqiqi. The most frequently cited counter-example, the Middle

Persian *Ayādgār-ī Zarērān* ("The Memorial of Zarēr"), is not the "Parthian epic fragment" it is

often claimed to be, but rather a prose work that is unlikely to be older than the 10th century in its

surviving form.[11] The emergence of epic *motaqāreb* verse in the Samanid and, subsequently,

Ghaznavid courts of the eastern Iranian world in the 10th and 11th centuries thus represents an

innovation in narrative and poetic technique. In this, it is paralleled by the slightly later rise of

another couplet form, the Old French octosyllable. As indicated by the Persian examples in this

chapter and the French passages in Chapter III, both forms were flexible, mellifluous, and

(especially once a few immense early works helped establish stock phrases and formulae)

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an oral liturgical corpus before being committed to writing by Zoroastrian priests, probably during the late Sasanian or early Islamic period.

[10] Jalil Dust-khwāh, *Farāyand-e Takvin-e Hamāseh-ye Irān* (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Daftar-e Pazhuhesh-hā-ye Farhangi, 1384 [2005-2006]), 94. Very little is known of Masʿudi Marvzi's *Shāhnāmeh*, though it seems to have predated Daqiqi's and Ferdowsi's efforts.

[11] Space prohibits a full discussion of this work and its critical history here. Suffice to note here that the scholarly tradition of claiming that the *Ayādgār* is poetry, most fully realized by Bo Utas, fails to overcome Mahmoud Omidsalar's objection that "even if we grant that some lines in the *Ayādgār-ī Zarērān* are poetic, their existence does not justify the further assumption that the whole text is a poem" and, therefore, "ascribing poetic form to this piece is totally unjustified" (Mahmoud Omidsalar, "Review: Unburdening Ferdowsi (Reviewed Work: *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings* by Olga Davidson)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 2 (Apr.-Jun., 1996): 239). Scholarly understanding of Middle Persian verse remains limited, to such an extent that there is disagreement over the roles, if any, played by rhyme, stress, or alliteration. Utas himself, a leading proponent of the *Ayādgār*-as-verse argument, admits in an article on Persian prosody that it is "quite difficult to find clear evidence of the metrical system of pre-Islamic poetry in Persian," and that "the available material is quite contradictory" with respect to rhyme. His statement on the *Ayādgār* in this context is so hedged that it has little analytic value—"Thus a verse *reconstruction* of the epic "*Ayādgār-ī Zarērān*" *seems* to produce *certain* passages with *semi-consistent* final rhyming" (Bo Utas, "Prosody: Meter and Rhyme," in *From Old to New Persian: Collected Essays by Bo Utas*, ed. Carina Jahani and Mehrdad Fallahzadeh (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2013), 203-230 (206-207) [italics added]). It might be pointed out that such effects have long proven a natural choice for performative narration, without necessarily being governed by a strict system of prosody. Trying to claim the Ayādgār as a poem is in many ways part of a larger project to contextualize it within the same grand tradition that culminates with Ferdowsi. The "Parthian" qualities of the text are chiefly a few spelling conventions and vocabulary choices, several of which—for instance, *bidaxš*, "viceroy"—appear in the indisputably 10th century *Ayādgār-ī Jāmāspīg*, which is set during the same legendary battle as *Ayādgār-ī Zarērān*. Overall, the *Ayādgār-ī Zarērān* displays closer kinship with this latter work than it does with anything definitively pre-Islamic. Its mention of war elephants implies a late Sāsāniān date at earliest, while its key plot divergences from other extant versions of the same story by writers such as al-Ṭabarī and Ferdowsi—most significantly, it assigns the lead heroic role to Zarēr's child son Bastwar rather than to the champion Esfandiyār—appear to be late variations upon a well-known tale. The standard edition is, unfortunately, the work of Davoud Monchi-Zadeh, an unrepentant Nazi whose efforts should not be promoted (even posthumously). A workable alternative is the Persian edition of Bijan Gheiby, whose outspoken nationalism is somewhat more palatable (Bijan Gheiby, ed., *Ayādgār-i Zarērān* (Bielefeld: Nemudar Publications, 1999)).

relatively undemanding for composition, memorization, and recitation. They allowed poetic ornament to be applied to longer narratives without detracting from the dramatic thrust, and thus proved ideal vehicles for the rapidly expanding literary prestige of both Persian and French.

Serpents in the Etymological Garden

The *azhdahā* proved quite literally at home in Persian epic, the word's metrical footprint (-˘-) facilitating its placement in a number of positions within the *motaqāreb* meter, including the key final rhyming position. But as with a number of complex concepts re-establishing themselves in the Arabic-inflected lexicon of New Persian, its meaning was open for contestation by early poets. While usually translated into English as "dragon," *azhdahā* has no philological connection with the Greek *drákōn*, "the seeing one"; or with the Semitic *tannīn/tinnīn*.[12] Rather, the word derives from Avestan *Aži Dahāka*, "Snake-Man,"[13] the name of a demon vanquished by the hero Θraētaona in several of the allusive Avestan sacred poems known *Yasht*s.[14] It is not

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[12] The etymology of this term is unclear; proposals include verbs meaning "to howl," "to stretch oneself," and "to ascend as/like smoke" (G. C. Heider, "Tannin תנין," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible Online*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, accessed March 24, 2020, doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2589-7802_DDDO_DDDO_Tannin). The decision by the translators of the Septuagint to nearly always render this word as *drákōn* represents a key moment in early comparative teratology. Islamicate dictionaries and encyclopedias would later add to the chain by equating *azhdahā* and *tinnīn*, before English translators completed the circle by translating *azhdahā* as "dragon."

[13] Martin Schwartz, "Review of M. Mayrhofer, *Iranisches Personennamenbuch* I: *Die altiranischen Namen* I: *Die awestischen Namen*, Vienna, 1977," *Orientalia* 49, no 1 (1980): 123f; Schwartz's etymological arguments are revised but his conclusions are fundamentally maintained (resulting in the translation "snake-man/brute/barbarian") in "Transformations of the Indo-Iranian Snake-Man: Myth, Language, Ethnoarcheology, and Iranian Identity," *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 2 (March 2012): 279. At the same time, Schwartz's work (as with that of many Indo-Europeanists) deserves considerable skepticism, basing many of its arguments on imagined "prehistoric inter-ethnic rivalries" that can be mapped onto such modern data as the skin color of the Nuristanis(!). Calvert Watkins, among others, prefers to interpret *Dahāka* as connoting "enemy, stranger," "drawn from the terms for the hostile, non-āryan peoples with whom [the Indo-Iranians] came in contact (and whom on occasion they enslaved)" (Watkins, *How to Kill*, 312). Leaving aside for the moment the deeply problematic racialist assumptions of a conquering Aryan *ethnos* and their servile subjects (present also, to be fair, in Schwartz), this interpretation of *Dahāka* seems unsatisfying as an identifying descriptor of a particular *aži*, given that all of the creatures so described are "enemies" of the texts' heroic characters. However, even if *Dahāka* did indeed refer to hostile tribespeople, it would still imply an anthropomorphic quality.

[14] The *Yasht*s in question are 5 and 15. (Aḥmad Tafażżoli, "Fērēdūn," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, IX/5 (2012): 531-533, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/feredu-).

entirely clear from the *Yashts* what human qualities this creature was envisioned as having. He is certainly described in monstrous terms: three-headed (*θrikamarəδəm*), possessing a thousand schemes (*hazaŋrā.yaoxštīm*), a demonic lie (*daēuuīm drujim*). Compared to other *aži*'s, Aži Dahāka does seem to engage more in acts of prayer and worship, however unsuccessfully; perhaps because his prayers aim at the depopulation of the world. Θraētaona, by contrast, prays for, and is granted, the strength to defeat Aži Dahāka.[15]

In Middle Persian texts, this character, now called *Azi Dahāg*, receives a place in Iranian legendary royal chronology after the Solomon-like Jamshēd. According to this narrative, *Azi Dahāg* is a foreign usurper who violently overthrows Jamshēd and rules for a thousand years, before he is in turn overthrown by the rightful heir Fereydun and imprisoned until Judgment Day. This outline remains essentially intact in later tellings, though it is important to note that few if any of the surviving Middle Persian texts are definitively earlier than Arabic sources which likewise make the "Snake-Man" a foreign-born king of Iran and describe him in essentially euhemeristic terms. Most prominent among these is Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rīkh al-Rusūl wa-l-Mulūk* ("History of Prophets and Kings"), an authoritative Islamic world history completed in Arabic in 915 CE. (Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad Balʿamī's Persian adaptation, the first extended work of New Persian prose, was completed perhaps half a century later.) Given the centrality of al-Ṭabarī's opus for medieval Islamic historiography, and the complex relationship between his depiction of al-Ḍaḥḥāk and the Zahhāk of New Persian imagination, it is worth examining his account in some depth.

Al-Ṭabarī establishes the Arabicized form of the name, al-Ḍaḥḥāk (pronounced Zahhāk in Persian) which became standard in later versions. The historian was himself a native of the

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[15] Prods Oktor Skjaervø, "Aždahā i. In Old and Middle Iranian," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, III/2 (2011): 191-205, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/azdaha-dragon-various-kinds#pt1.

Caspian littoral region known in his day as Tabarestān and today as Māzandārān.[16] As such, he

almost certainly grew up speaking a form of Persian, though he may well not have been literate

in it—he spent his adult life in Baghdad, far from the eastern kingdoms where New Persian was

emerging as a written court language. Given his background, it is striking that he seems

unfamiliar with any common Persian noun related to the name al-Ḍaḥḥāk. Instead, he implies

that the original Persian version is *Az(h)dahāq*—a form which, his modern editors point out, is

"already Arabicized."[17] Al-Ṭabarī's seeming ignorance of a Persian common noun like

azhdahā(k) suggests that this was not a widely recognizable term, even for a well-educated and

intellectually curious scholar, around the turn of the tenth century CE. As such, it supports the

contention that this word's meaning became established through particular poetic usage later in

that century.

Al-Ṭabarī cites the claim—taken up by Ferdowsi, to somewhat different effect—that al-

Ḍaḥḥāk was an Arab, noting the evocative verse of al-Ḥasan bin Hāni[18]: *wa kāna minna-ḍ-*

ḍaḥḥāku yaʿbuduhu-l- / khābilu wa-l-jinn fī masāribihā[19] ("And one of us was that Ḍaḥḥāk,

whom madmen and *jinn* venerate in their riverbeds"). The line combines traditional pride in

possessing a renowned ancestor with a poetic nod towards that ancestor's infamy. Al-Ḍaḥḥāk

remains venerated, bin Hāni asserts, but only by those who have lost their wits and those who,

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[16] Franz Rosenthal, "General Introduction," in *The History of al-Ṭabari, Volume I: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, trans. and ann. Franz Rosenthal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 10-11.

[17] William M. Brinner, trans. and ann., *The History of al-Ṭabari, Volume II: Prophets and Patriarchs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1. The "Arabicization" in question is the transformation of *k* to *q*. While al-Ṭabarī spells his "Persian" term *azdahāq*, he clearly intends the second consonant to be the *zh* ([ʒ]) sound, represented in modern Persian orthography by the letter ژ—he describes this as "*al-ḥarfa iladhī bayna-s-sīni wa-z-zāyi fī-l-fārisiyyati*," "the sound that is between the 's' and the 'z' in Persian" (Abū Jaʿfar Muhammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-Ṭabarī: Taʾrīkh al-Rusul w-al Mulūk, al-Joz' al-Awwal,* ed. Muhammad Abū-l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Al-Qāhira [Cairo]: Dār al-Maʿārif bi-Miṣr, 1966), 194).

[18] William M. Brinner identifies this poet as Muḥammad bin Hāni' bin Muḥammad bin Saʿdūn al-Azdī al-Andalusī, "the Mutanabbī of the West"; but given that this bin Hāni' was not born until some fifteen years after al-Ṭabarī's death, either the attribution is mistaken or these lines are a later interpolation in the text (Brinner, *History*, 1).

[19] Cited in al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 194.

according to folklore, make men lose their wits: the *jinn*, polymorphous beings created from smokeless fire.[20]

The implication that al-Ḍaḥḥāk is a human indelibly linked to inhuman beings surfaces again in al-Ṭabarī's account, when the Arab prince kills his father in order to gain access to demonic powers (*al-shayāṭīn*, "Satans, devils"; in Ferdowsi's poem, Zahhāk commits this act at the instigation of *Eblis*, Satan himself). Persians and Arabs agree, al-Ṭabarī reports, "that he ruled all the climes, and was a debauched wizard" (*annahu malaka al-aqālīma kullihā wa annahu kāna sāḥiran fājiran*[21]). The character's overbearing sexuality, implied by the adjective *fājir*, remains a core aspect of his monstrosity in later depictions. But while al-Ṭabarī's description certainly possesses a fantastical element, none of it is particularly draconic, and none of the Arabic terms later equated to the Persian *azhdahā* (such as *tinnīn* or *ḥayya*) appear in his story of the monarch.

However, there are a few details relating to polycephaly which both continue Persian traditions of the character's physical monstrosity, and look forward to his role as the ur-*azhdahā* in Ferdowsi. One of the sources al-Ṭabarī cites describes al-Ḍaḥḥāk as seven-headed, though this likely results from a confusion with the Zoroastrian celestial dragon, whose seven heads represented the malevolent influence of the seven planets; and/or other seven-headed Middle Eastern monsters in the tradition of the Ugaritic Lotān. But al-Ṭabarī's main account, which he attributes to Hishām bin Muḥammad, takes an intriguingly euhemeristic approach.

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[20] Sara Kuehn points out that there are numerous references in both Persian and Arabic sources that speak of Zahhāk in unreservedly positive terms, describing his magnificent royal style and proudly claiming him as an ancestor. However, many of these predate Ferdowsi's highly influential depiction; and they always coexisted alongside a tendency to demonize him, including through identification "with real or external enemies such as foreign nations or oppressive powers or rulers" (Sara Kuehn, *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 8-9).

[21] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, 196.

Wa yuqālu innahu kharaja fī mankibihi silʿatāni fa-kānatā taḍribān ʿalayhi, fa-yashtaddu ʿalayhi al-wajʿu ḥattā yaṭliyahumā bi-dimāghi insānin fa-kāna yaqtulu lidhālik fī kulli yawmin rajulayni wa yaṭlā silʿatihi bi-damāghihumā fa-idhā faʿala dhālika sakana mā yajidu.[22]

    (And they say that two cysts emerged on his shoulders, and they ached badly. And the pain became so intense for him that he anointed them with human brains. And for this he would kill two men every day, and anoint his cysts with their brains, and when he did this, what afflicted him subsided.)

This intrusion of graphic body horror into the detached narration of ancient history seems unmotivated, besides contributing to al-Ḍaḥḥāk's repulsive villainy. Yet the two cysts (ganglia, growths; *silʿatān*) on the king's shoulders, and the gruesome regimen he undertakes to cure them, seem to be al-Ṭabarī's and his sources' attempt to rationalize a story which appears in a more unapologetically fantastical vein in the *Shāhnāmeh*. Discussed in greater detail below, this version states that when Zahhāk entered into league with evil, Eblis kissed his shoulders, and from the site of each kiss grew a voracious snake. These ravenous serpents grew back every time they were cut off, and could only be appeased by feeding them human brains.

    Like his ancestor, the Avestan *Aži Dahāka*, the New Persian Zahhāk thus possesses three heads (now specified as one human, two serpentine); and combines qualities of man and snake. It is important not to overemphasize the continuity of this character across at least two millennia and at least one tectonic religious-cultural shift. The specific image that came to define Zahhāk, a human king with his head flanked by snakes, may be linked to a Middle Eastern iconographic tradition stretching back to depictions of the Sumerian deity Ningishzida and the Babylonian/Assyrian god Nergal;[23] it may also have arisen independently through associations of royal and serpentine power. However, it is indisputable that a direct etymological line connects

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[22] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 196.
[23] Abbas Daneshvari, *Of Serpents and Dragons in Islamic Art: An Iconographical Study* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2011), 23; and Kuehn, *Dragon*, 118.

the demonic entity from Zoroastrian myth to the human king whose wickedness transforms him into a hybrid creature.

More complicated, however, is the process by which the Avestan term also gave rise to a common noun, *azhdahā*. Some Manichaean Middle Persian texts do use *'jdh'g*, a close cognate of *azhdahā* and likewise derived from *Aži Dahāka*, as a term for terrible serpents and astrological phenomena.[24] But Manichaean mythology contains a number of monstrous beings with no direct cognates in the mainstream Persian tradition, including the aquatic *mazan* and the demonic *āsrēshtār*. This suggests that we cannot assume the direct applicability of Manichaean material in tracing the emergence of the term *azhdahā* in New Persian.

Turning to the corpus of Pahlavi Middle Persian, evidence is lacking for the usage of *azhdahāg* to describe generic reptilian monsters. D. N. MacKenzie's authoritative *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* has an entry for the word, but treats it purely as a proper noun, referring to "a legendary 'dragon' king, Dahāg."[25] (MacKenzie's careful scare-quoting of 'dragon' here is admirable.) In the *Ayādgār-ī Zarērān*, which tells of the struggle between the first Zoroastrian king Wištāsp and his pagan enemies, the epic fight against the sorcerous but certainly human Xyōn is called *azdahāg razm ī wištāspān*, "Wištāsp's dragon-battle."[26] Here, the evocation of Aži Dahāk seems intentional. Wištāsp's victory over the unbelievers recapitulates and re-enacts Θraētaona's defeat of Aži Dahāk; there is, furthermore, an eschatological echo, as both struggles will be repeated at the end of time. The Middle Persian *Kārnāmag-ī Ardaxshir-ī Pābagān* ("Deed-Book of Ardashir son of Pāpag") features a malevolent snakelike beast, the totemic pet

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[24] Skjaervø, "Aždahā i."

[25] David Neil MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), 16.

[26] This phrase appears three times in the *Ayādgār* (sentences 39, 41, and 114).

of a bandit lord named Haftānbōxt. But this is called a *kirm*[27] (cognate with English *worm*,[28] which is likewise an archaic term for a monster—e.g. the Lambton Worm, the Sockburn Worm, the *wyrm* of Beowulf's last fight—and a current one for a small invertebrate). Ferdowsi's version of Ardashir's story, discussed in more detail below, seems to call attention to the unusual terminology. He includes an extensive backstory, unknown from other extant sources, about a girl who finds the *kerm* in an apple she is eating and nurtures it until it grows monstrous. But the Middle Persian text treats *kirm* simply as a natural term for a serpentine monster, and Haftānbōxt's sobriquet, *Kirm Xwadāy*, "Worm-Lord," needs no gloss to avoid comedy. The *Greater* or *Iranian Bundahishn* does reference *azdahāk* among the *xrafstar*, the "noxious beasts."[29] But even aside from the difficulties of dating this work (the earliest manuscript of which is mid-16th c.),[30] its aims of religious instruction and categorization mean that its evocations of *azdahāk* are inseparable from the figure of *Aži Dahāka*.

Even into the New Persian era, it can be difficult to tell if a particular usage of the word is referencing the specific character of Zahhāk, or a generic reptilian beast. Abu 'Abdollāh Ja'far ebn-e Mohammad Rudaki, famed as the "Adam" of New Persian verse, uses the term once, as a metaphor for a foe of his patron Nasr bin Ahmad—"*doshman agar azhdahā-st pish-e senān-ash / gardad chun mum pish-e ātesh-e suzān*" ("Before his lance, though the enemy be an *azhdahā*, he becomes like wax before a burning flame.")[31] In this line, Rudaki instantiates the employment of

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[27] David Neil Mackenzie, ed., *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, with additions by Elio Provasi (Göttingen & Pisa: TITUS, 1993 & 2010), Part No. 11-Part No. 14.

[28] Both derive from Proto-Indo-European *$k^w\acute{r}mis$

[29] Behramgore Tehmuras Anklesaria, trans., *Greater Bundahishn* (Bombay: on behalf of the Rahnumae Mazdayasnan Sabha, 1956), 185.

[30] David Neil MacKenzie, "Bundahišn," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, IV/5 (1989): 547-551, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bundahisn-primal-creation.

[31] This is line 58 of Rudaki's famous qasida, "*Mādar-e Mey*" ("Mother of Wine") (Abu 'Abdollāh Ja'far ebn-e Mohammad Rudaki, *Divān-e Rudaki-ye Samarqandi*, ed. Sa'id Nafisi and Y. Braginski (Tehrān: Mo'asseseh-ye Enteshārāt-e Negāh, 1376 [1997]), 102.

azhdahā as a figure for ferocious warriors, both valiant and villainous. This figurative usage will become central to the poetic imagination of the creature. But the line could just as easily be equating the enemy to Zahhāk, smitten down by the righteous ruler's weapon. Daqiqi, pioneer of the *motaqāreb* epic verse form that Ferdowsi popularized, seems to refer more unambiguously to Zahhāk when he writes "*ayā shāhi keh molk-e to qadim ast / neyābat bord takht az azhdahākā*"[32] ("O King whose realm is ancient, your royal position was won from Azhdahākā). These references indicate that well into the tenth century CE, forms like *azhdahā* could be understood as allusions to history, rather than to a teratological category. And they suggest that even after Ferdowsi and his successors began using *azhdahā* in a broader sense, a hint of humanity clung to the word. Even if they were likely ignorant of its precise Avestan etymology, writers of New Persian knew that *azhdahā* evoked the "Snake-Man" whose hybrid form was an object of fascinated revulsion. There is thus an intriguing slippage between *azhdahā*'s origin as a proper noun and its evocative potential when made generic.

In later texts, some of the chimeric valence of the word was undoubtedly lost. Partly through equation with the Arabic *tinnīn,* the *azhdahā* was linked to its more prosaic cousin, the simple snake (*mār*). Writers posited that the *azhdahā* was a life-stage reached by particularly venerable snakes; compilers of the encyclopedic *'ajā'ib* texts broke this down into a gradual natural process,[33] while poets employed this transformation metaphorically, usually in the sense of a small fault or problem left to fester into something much worse.[34] At the same time, the visual vocabulary of illuminated manuscripts, developed largely in the post-Mongol period, drew

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[32] Cited in *Loghatnāmeh-ye Dekhodā*, *Vol. 1*, s.v. "*azhdahāk*" (Tehrān: Enteshārāt-e Dāneshgāh-e Tehrān, 2006).
[33] E.g., in the *'Ajā'ebnāmeh* of Mohammad ebn-e Mahmud Hamadāni (Mohammad ebn-e Mahmud Hamadāni, *'Ajā'ebnāmeh*., ed. Ja'far Modarres Sādeqi (Tehrān: Nashr-e Markaz, 1375 [1996]), 310).
[34] Asadi-Tusi, for instance, uses this in his *Garshāspnāmeh*: *keh mār azhdahā gardad az ruzgār* ("for in time, the snake becomes an *azhdahā*") (Hakim Abu Nasr 'Ali ebn-e Ahmad Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, ed. Habib Yaghmā'i (Tehrān: Ketābforushi va Chāpkhāneh-ye Brukhim, 1317 [1938]), 264.)

heavily on Chinese iconography in depicting *azhdahā* as fire-spitting, four-legged reptiles,[35] which Western commentators readily described as dragons. These images have become integral to the texts they illustrate; it is almost impossible to imagine the *Shāhnāmeh* today without conjuring up visions of the lush world crafted by the Safavid and Mughal artists who were tasked with creating prestige editions of medieval poems. These illuminations certainly exerted pressure on the popular conception of the *azhdahā*, and influenced dragon-tales of more recent vintage, such as the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān*. In their embrace of zoological anomaly, they might even be said to continue the hybrid pedigree of the *azhdahā*. But it is important not to anachronistically read poems of the eleventh and twelfth centuries through visions concocted in the early modern period.

Slaying the Indo-European Dragon (and its Slayer)

The changes in visualization and identification that the *azhdahā* has undergone since its entry into New Persian literature point to the importance of transformation in considering its varied roles. From the long etymological road leading back to the three-headed demon of the *Avesta*, to the monstrous deformations of Zahhāk and the complex metamorphoses envisaged by the writers of *'ajā'ib*, the *azhdahā* asserts itself as a "vector of becoming" *par excellence*. While this line of analysis will be developed throughout my close readings below, it is important to assert here as a corrective to other approaches that would fossilize the *azhdahā* within a particular sphere of meaning, particularly those formulated through reference to a cross-cultural archetype of the "dragon." And while the astrological or hagiographical serpents of Persian

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[35] Norah M. Titley traces this development to the influence of Chinese artists at Rashid al-Din's academy at Tabriz in the early 14th century CE (Norah M. Titley, *Dragons in Persian, Mughal and Turkish Art* (London: The British Library, 1981), 3).

literature sometimes manage to wriggle away from these rigid readings, such prescriptivism has proven particularly common with regards to the scene-type emphasized in this chapter—the violent encounter of the hero with the *azhdahā*.

Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh lists sixteen such battles in Iranian epic, including eight from the *Shāhnāmeh* itself (one of which is Fereydun's battle with the thoroughly anthropomorphized Zahhāk.) In all but one of these—the striking conclusion to the *Bahmannāmeh*—the hero emerges victorious.[36] Though Khaleghi-Motlagh's list is not exhaustive, it indicates a key problem with the *azhdahā*. If the defeat of these creatures was so often a foregone conclusion, why did poets continue to include them in their epics? What were the dramatic and narrative functions of these confrontations?

Perhaps the most ubiquitous and unsatisfying answer to these questions has been that such encounters re-stage a core myth of prehistoric culture. Calvert Watkins, in his irresistibly-titled philological tome *How To Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, states the orthodox position: "Why does the hero slay the serpent? … The dragon symbolizes Chaos, in the largest sense, and killing the dragon represents the ultimate victory of Cosmic Truth and Order over Chaos."[37] This is the idea of the *Chaoskampf*,[38] the struggle between a god or hero (often identified as a thunder- or sky-god) and a monstrous serpent associated with the primordial waters of chaos. By defeating the serpent, the god establishes cosmic order (particularly in Middle Eastern/Mesopotamian versions) or releases the life-giving rains jealously guarded by the beast (in Indo-European, and especially Indo-Iranian versions). Antiquarians from the 19th

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[36] Jalāl Khāleqi-Motlaq [Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh], "Aždahā ii. In Persian Literature," in *Encyclopædia Iranica,* III/2 (2011): 191-205, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/azdaha-dragon-various-kinds#pt2.
[37] Watkins, *How to Kill*, 299.
[38] The term originates in an 1895 work by the Biblical scholar Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: eine religiongeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1985). A survey of JSTOR results suggests that its current academic use remains largely confined to Biblical studies. However, as a shorthand, it remains useful for comparative discussion.

century down to the more recent work of Watkins and M. L. West have seen the archetypal struggle of hero and dragon as not only foundational to postulated ancient cultures and their descendants, but also powerfully enduring, continuing to inflect texts from the medieval era or later, long after the mythologies referenced therein had given way to monotheistic religions. Speaking Indo-European languages but situated within the Middle East, with lines of evidence that can be traced back to the late Bronze Age of the *Avesta*, Iranian culture has proved vital to this narrative of a single, primordial dragon archetype. As such, many if not most academic treatments of the *azhdahā*, in both Persian and English, anchor their analyses of the creature to the postulated Indo-European dragon mythos.[39]

Even when realizing the reductivist dangers of this analysis, advocates of this approach to draconic studies offer the fantastic features of reptilian monsters as indelible signs of atavistic origin. M. L. West writes:

> The archetypal Indo-European dragon-slaying myth is presumably the one… where the victor is the thunder-god and his victim the monstrous serpent that blocks the waters… I do not suggest that all dragon-slaying heroes are faded thunder-gods, only that—seeing that dragons or colossal serpents are not a feature of the real world—the concept of slaying one as a heroic feat may have originated with the cosmic myth.[40]

There are, however, a number of problems with using the *Chaoskampf* motif to explain or even undergird the epic appearances of the *azhdahā*. To begin with, the myth lacks cultural specificity, appearing not only among groups speaking Indo-European languages but also,

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[39] In addition to the work of Watkins and West cited here, which draw on Persian lore but are not centered around it, examples include Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh's *Encyclopædia Iranica* article on the "Aždahā"; the only book fully devoted to the *azhdahā* in Iranian epic, Mansur Rastegar-Fasā'i's *Azhdahā dar Asātir-e Irān* (e.g., 8); the two most comprehensive books on the Islamicate dragon in English, Sara Kuehn's *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art* (e.g., 87) and Abbas Daneshvari's *Serpents and Dragons in Islamic Art* (e.g., 32-33); and numerous articles (e.g., Mahmoud Omidsalar, "The Beast *Babr-e Bayān*: Contributions to Iranian Folklore and Etymology," *Studia Iranica* 13, no. 1 (1984): 140).

[40] West, *Indo-European Poetry,* 430.

famously, in Semitic (YHWH vs Livyatan) as well as Sinitic, Japanese, and Mesoamerican texts, among others. This may suggest intercultural diffusion, or indeed an almost universal narrative tendency, rather than pure intracultural evolution. Noting this, Calvert Watkins states that "We cannot speak of an exclusively Indo-European dragon; our task rather is to sort out the Indo-European modalities of the myth as a verbal message and to underline the peculiarities which characterize the Indo-European version and which allow us to assert that it existed."[41] The remainder of his book is devoted to postulating an ancestral poetic formula, "HERO SLAY SERPENT," that echoes throughout cultures from Ireland to India. Yet whether regarded as a primordial feature of "Indo-European culture" or a meme diffused across a variety of groups, this analysis suffers from the shortcomings of "grand comparison" highlighted by Bruce Lincoln:

> …use of comparison to reconstruct (i.e., hypothesize) a remote past era for which no direct evidence survives is an invitation to project one's favored fantasies onto a relatively blank screen. That screen, moreover, is distorting and prejudicial, as it invests such projections with the prestige of "origins"…[while] the attempt to show transmission of culture traits always advances—if only subtextually—a tendentious ranking of the peoples involved, constituting temporal primacy ("originality," "invention," "authenticity") as a sign of superior status, while conversely treating reception as a mark of relative backwardness, need, and submission.[42]

While some of Lincoln's proscriptions are perhaps needlessly harsh,[43] his essential objections to unifying schemes of comparative explication hold, on both methodological and political grounds. To posit a unitary "Indo-European dragon myth" behind accounts of the *azhdahā* plays into fantasies of masculine, conquering Aryans (detectable also in Watkins' reference to Indo-Iranians slaying and enslaving their enemies, mentioned above). It seeks a

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[41] Watkins, *How to Kill*, 27.
[42] Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges,* 26.
[43] For instance, one could cite any number of "traits" that have undergone well-documented transmission from one culture to another—the alphabet, tomato-based sauces, anime—without necessarily privileging the originating culture, or imposing other hierarchies on analyses of the multiform successes of these memes.

dangerous equation of antiquity and authenticity, one which in turn prejudices scholarly approaches. For instance, Rezā Ghafuri asserts the great antiquity of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* because, of all the Iranian epic tales of *azhdahā*, it conforms closest to the postulated Indo-European tale-type.[44] A counterclaim will be made below, under the discussion of that text; suffice to note here that imagining a unified primordial blueprint and then dating texts by how closely they resemble it is both the most basic kind of circular reasoning and, I would argue, a fundamentally incorrect notion of how narratives evolve.

Equally importantly, the stories taken as individual instantiations of the *Chaoskampf* often diverge significantly from the posited model. The medieval Iranian examples are no different. *Azhdahā* are primarily terrestrial, dwelling regularly in mountains and deserts. Their slayers are only incidentally associated, via metaphor, with the sky or thunder (the monsters themselves are as well; sometimes, as in the *Bahmannāmeh*, the association is more than metaphorical). And while these creatures' habitats are sometimes barren, this is attributed to their virulent venom and fire-breathing, not to their hoarding of water. I have indicated above, and will continue to develop throughout this chapter, the idea that *azhdahā* often display hybrid characteristics of humans and reptiles. This important feature is obscured by the reductionist type-casting of the *Chaoskampf*, which starkly delineates serpentine monster from conquering hero. But perhaps most crucially, to assert that medieval authors were duty-bound to follow the narrative patterns laid down by their ancient ancestors is to deny the creativity, socio-historical responsiveness, and self-awareness of these authors. It is one thing to assert etymological links, such as undoubtedly exist between, for instance, the Avestan Aži Dahāk and the New Persian

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[44] Rezā Ghafuri, ed., *Haft Manzumeh-ye Hamāsi: Bizhannāmeh, Kok-Kuhzādnāmeh, Babr-e Bayān, Patyāreh, Tahminehnāmeh-ye Kutāh, Tahminehnāmeh-ye Boland, Razmnāmeh-ye Shekāvandkuh* (Tehrān, Markaz-e Pezhuheshi-ye Mirās-e Maktub, 1394 [2015]), 222.

Zahhāk. That both are evil and tricephalous is unlikely to be a coincidence; and by understanding that some connection existed between the common noun *azhdahā* and the proper noun Zahhāk, I argue, Persian writers were able to use these creatures to examine the relationship between humans and other beings. But this is very different from claiming that the combats of warrior and *azhdahā* in classical Persian verse epic directly recapitulate a theoretical millennia-old myth of order's foundational victory over chaos, or that invoking this myth constitutes a helpful analysis of these scenes. After all, far from establishing civilizational order, the hero's slaying of the reptilian beast (particularly when this is the first act of his heroic career) tends to entangle him in cycles of violence that propel him towards his own death. While the young champions Rostam and Garshāsp are victorious over the *azhdahā* they encounter, these triumphs function less as proofs of personal invincibility than as *memento mori*. While its death may temporarily avert disaster, the monster's dismembered body prefigures a world wrenched from unitary harmony into agonistic division.

The desire to postulate universal dragons and then find a "key" to their zoological anomalies and cultural capital goes well beyond the *Chaoskampf*. The *azhdahā* and its counterparts have been euhemerized as cysts (in al-Ṭabarī), giant snakes and weather patterns (in the *'ajā'ib* literature), volcanoes,[45] the fossilized bones of prehistoric beasts,[46] sturgeons,[47] costumed dancers,[48] and atavistic memories from our simian ancestors' days as meat for feline,

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[45] E.g., Rastegār-Fasā'i, *Azhdahā*, 95-96.

[46] E.g., Mayor, *Fossil Hunters*. Mayor's work is good at turning up obscure references, and succeeds in proving that fossil finds were objects of value, curiosity, and speculation in the ancient world. However, her attempts to prove more deterministic lines of influence (such as the derivation of the classical gryphon's physiognomy from the fossilized bones of the Upper Cretaceous *Protoceratops andrewsi*), while widely cited, are weakly supported (Mark Witton, "Why *Protoceratops* almost certainly wasn't the inspiration for the griffin legend," 4 April 2016, markwitton-com.blogspot.com/2016/04/why-protoceratops-almost-certainly.html?m=1).

[47] A. D. H. Bivar, "The Allegory of Astyages," in *Acta Iranica. Deuxième Série. Hommages et Opera Minora. Acta Iranica 28*, Vol. XII: *Barg-e Sabz/A Green Leaf: Papers in Honour of Professor Jes P. Asmussen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 509-520.

[48] Mary Barnard, "A Dragon Hunt," *The American Scholar* 33, no. 3 (Summer, 1964): 422-427.

serpentine, and raptorial predators.[49] As some of these references show, this urge is as old as the creature's literary existence itself; as their variety and eccentricity indicates, they tend to be both individually and collectively unsatisfying.

Not all modern discussion of the *azhdahā* is quite so reductive. Two of the most recent and more sophisticated studies of Islamicate dragons are based in art historical evidence: Abbas Daneshvari's *Of Serpents and Dragons in Islamic Art: An Iconographical Study* and Sara Kuehn's *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art*, both from 2011. These texts cover a similar corpus of materials and overlap somewhat in their conclusions, though Kuehn's work is considerably longer and more thorough. Both emphasize the "dragon's"[50] ubiquity across media and its polyvalent connotations. While citing the notion of the *Chaoskampf*, both analyses extend beyond it. For Daneshvari, the dragon is a symbol "that was meant to explicate baffling phenomena such as causation, order and chaos. The beast stood for amalgamations of dichotomous forces whose balance made life and its understanding possible."[51] This harmonizing of opposites coheres in the dragon's use as a visual motif of balance, framing, and encompassing in a variety of decorative contexts. Kuehn concurs, writing that dragons are "characterized by a coalescence of maleficence and beneficence," and possess "inherent polyvalence and ambiguity."[52] As wild creatures associated with vegetal and bestial imagery, they "express, in a mythical language, aspects of the natural setting and the positive or dangerous qualities of those aspects, such as rain, drought or flood." They are capable of bringing "stability or disorder, stasis or dynamism, life or death," and symbolize "enemies" as well as "champions of a society, group

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[49] David E. Jones, *An Instinct for Dragons* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[50] Both studies use this term abundantly and without problematization.
[51] Daneshvari, *Serpents,* 8.
[52] Kuehn, *Dragon*, 5.

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or class."[53] The dragon possesses "twin functions as deliverer and destroyer, roles that link it to the elemental cycle of birth and death."[54] Its "great transformative power" and metamorphic ability, furthermore, have a transcendent quality, validating the creature's association with Sufis and mystics.[55]

While based in visual evidence, both studies turn at times to textual analysis. Daneshvari, for instance, invokes the *Shāhnāmeh* to argue that "...by slaying a dragon the king himself is transformed into a dragon,"[56] suggesting the deep imbrication of two entities often imagined as diametrically opposed. Generally, though, Kuehn's and Daneshvari's interest in texts lies less in literary complexity than in the use of these sources to provide narrative "legends" (in both senses) through which visual representations can be glossed and activated. Kuehn, for instance, writes of dragon-battles:

> In Iranian legends the dragon combat was one of the wonders and heroic feats required as proof of the king's or hero's legitimacy, so becoming by extension an important device of royal or heroic ideology. A royal victory over the dragon was intended to manifest virtuous conduct and to endow the royal persona with heroic qualities. The visual enactment of this victory communicated mastery over the mighty mythical creature as well as implying metaphorically that through this deed of prowess the vanquisher was able to take on the formidable qualities of the dragon, that is to say, assume part of the dragon's nature…[57]

This argument—that the representation of man-fighting-dragon is an ongoing discursive strategy of royal legitimation—is certainly more sophisticated than appeals to atavistic myth. Kuehn's assertion that the successful slayer assumes "part of the dragon's nature" echoes Daneshvari's point above, and the links that form between the monster and its killer will be

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[53] Kuehn, *Dragon*, 11.
[54] Kuehn, *Dragon,* 195.
[55] Kuehn, *Dragon,* 200.
[56] Daneshvari, *Serpents*, 51.
[57] Kuehn, *Dragon,* 111.

explored throughout this chapter. But a number of fissures trouble Kuehn's treatment of the motif. Note this passage's reliance on a postulated monolithic bloc of "Iranian legends," as opposed to a diverse array of texts by a number of authors spanning several centuries and many religious, cultural, and regional identities. The phrase "the king's or hero's legitimacy" ignores the fact that these are often diametrically opposed, and that the *Shāhnāmeh* in particular is deeply concerned with the conflict between centralized royal authority and the power of provincial aristocracies.[58]

There is also a slippage in Kuehn's analysis between narrative and historical agency. The legitimacy of legendary kings is here only an instrumental device in the legitimation of historical kings. These latter could not kill actual dragons; they were forced merely to represent themselves (or their mythic ancestors) as killing dragons. For this "visual enactment" to effectively "communicat[e] mastery over the mighty mythical creature," the creature first has to be subordinated to a specific and closed set of meanings. But this symbolism only coheres in the imagery itself, the moment of slaying, which must then be imbued with a transparency it does not automatically possess. "Mastering a dragon" must be made to mean mastering something else. This is in contrast to epic literature, which carefully distinguishes combats with *azhdahā* from those with rebellious lords, demons, or other wild beasts.

By understanding dragons primarily as "symbols," analyses like Kuehn's quote above reduce them to objects, rather than the influential agents that medieval texts so often insist they are. And while this taxidermic flattening is perhaps exactly what noble patrons would wish for, there is no need to reify particular ideological investment in narratives that both pre- and post-

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[58] A reading of the epic in these terms is central to Dick Davis, *Epic & Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2006).

date specific attempts at instantiating power. It is useful to note here, for instance, how often poets invoke the *azhdahā* to deny the permanence of any temporal authority.

<u>Monstrous, Weird, and Eerie</u>

Perhaps all analysis of these beasts is doomed to at least a modicum of reductionism, the hero's predilection for dismembering his quarry replicated in the quest for critical intervention. My hope here is to discuss the *azhdahā* while leaving it as intact as possible; to observe what was at stake in literary encounters with it, without stripping it of the power that made it ubiquitous in Iranian imaginations of the past. It is with this aim that I draw upon the monster theory and weird theory of late 20th and early 21st century critics. As with the modern perspectives on time-travel fiction that inform my analyses in Chapter I, these teratological approaches offer alternatives to the well-trodden routes of philology and direct symbolism.

The speculative interventions that strange creatures enact upon their textual ecosystems have increasingly become the focus of modern theoretical discussions about the monstrous, weird, and eerie. These approaches are undoubtedly anachronistic and culturally detached from the Persian texts considered below. However, they can provide both a helpful critical vocabulary for discussing the *azhdahā*; and a body of thought against which the literary idiosyncrasies of these creatures can stand out all the more clearly.

Perhaps the most influential modern monster theorist is medievalist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, whose 1996 edited volume *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* remains the field's foundational text. Cohen's preface and contribution to the volume, a piece entitled "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," are now ubiquitously cited by medievalists and others engaging with monstrosity. In these essays, Cohen argues "…that the monster is best understood as an

embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis."[59] The "Seven Theses" are written in an elusive (and allusive) semi-poetic style that is eminently quotable, if at times frustratingly unrigorous. Still, the Theses have provided an invaluable set of frameworks for subsequent approaches to the monstrous. Cohen's first postulate, that "The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body," provides the overarching argument that monsters embody cultural interests and anxieties; it validates their study, essentially reiterating J. R. R. Tolkien's legendary 1936 lecture "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics"[60] in updated critical language. The third thesis takes a deconstructive turn: "The Monster Is a Harbinger of Category Crisis," a "third term" or Derridean *supplément* that, "[b]ecause of its ontological liminality," rejects binary systems and introduces instead a radical realignment of categorizations. This crisis, the fourth thesis insists, is in fact the essence of the monster's dangerous nature, which "[b]y revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential," "threatens to destroy not just individual members of a society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed." Yet human fear of this destruction occasions a Lacanian *jouissance*. "Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire," the sixth thesis states, invoking (though only cursorily delving into) the non-accidental intimate relations between "fantasy" (dragons, daggers, dwarves) and "fantasy" (sexuality suspended between imagination and fulfilment); the third chapter of this dissertation addresses this theme in considerably more depth.[61]

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[59] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Preface: In a Time of Monsters," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), x.

[60] J. R. R. Tolkien, "*Beowulf:* The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1937): 245-295.

[61] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-25.

Cohen is far from alone in the field of modern monster studies. Through the scholarly organization MEARCSTAPA ("Monsters: the Experimental Association for the Research of Cryptozoology Through Scholarly Theory and Practical Application"; *mearcstapa* is a term from *Beowulf*, describing Grendel as a "border-prowler"), art historian Asa Simon Mittmann and his colleagues have sought to make rigorous considerations of the monstrous a cornerstone of anti-colonial and anti-racist medieval studies. Posthuman theorist Patricia MacCormack both draws on Cohen and explodes the parameters of his analyses. She uses the term "monster," she writes, "not to describe a thing but more to name a catalyst toward an encounter"—specifically "the element outside the observer that sparks and creates an event of perception that necessitates the participation of two unlike entities. The monster can simultaneously refer to anything that refuses being 'the human' and that which makes the person who encounters it posthuman." This "encounter with alterity," for MacCormack, demands the formulation of a radical new ethics of identification.[62]

In MacCormack's posthumanism, monster theory brushes up against another school of criticism: the "weird theory" developed through the work of writers such as Mark Fisher, Eugene Thacker, and China Miéville. Unlike the monster theorists, who are often grounded in premodern studies, these critics tend to position their interventions within the modern world (or, indeed, the future). If Grendel may be said to be the archetypal monster for the monster theorists from Tolkien onward—the lurking other who is yet unsettlingly human (*on weres wæstmum … / næfne he wæs mara þonne ænig man oðer*[63]), then for the weird theorists it is H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu—fundamentally alien and alienating, *outer* more than *other*. If Cohen's monsters reveal

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[62] Patricia MacCormack, "Posthuman Teratology," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman with Peter J. Dendle (Basingstoke: Ashgate, 2011), 294.
[63] "in man's form… though he was huger than any other man" (*Beowulf*, lines 1352-1353).

that "difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating," gesturing thereby to a liberational, intersectional ethics, then the denizens of the weird possess an "implacable alterity," an "irreducible" difference that insists on a "chaotic, amoral, anthropoperipheral universe."[64] Read against weird theory, the monster theorists sometimes verge on an anthropocentrism that risks undermining the very foundations of their project. Asa Mittmann and Marcus Hensel assert that "inside every monster lurks a human being,"[65] a useful call towards cultural readings of the supernatural that nonetheless suggests the disappointing anticlimax of a *Scooby Doo* episode, the thrilling mystery beast unmasked as a banal community mischief-maker. In contrast, Eugene Thacker conceptualizes the demon as germ of anti-anthropocentric thought, "a placeholder for some sort of non-human, malefic agency that acts against the human (that is, against the world-for-us)."[66] Yet in positing the weird's "radical unremembered alterity,"[67] its theorists can risk falling back on a lazy presentism that denies both the deep history of speculative teratology and the essential *pastness* of many monsters, the *azhdahā* included. The supernatural creatures of premodern Persian literature thus offer opportunities to nuance, critique, and put into conversation these two analytical systems.

Classical Persian Teratology

In attempting to link the critical approaches discussed above to the figure of the *azhdahā* a problem of lexicon arises. Classical Persian lacks a single word to differentiate the category of

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[64] China Miéville, "M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire: Weird; Hauntological; Versus and/or and and/or or?" *Collapse IV* (2008): 112.

[65] Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel, "Introduction: A Marvel of Monsters," in *Primary Sources on Monsters: Demonstrare Volume 2*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), 1.

[66] Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy (Volume 1)* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 11.

[67] Miéville, "M. R. James," 113.

"monster" from other animals.[68] Ontologically distinguishing the *azhdahā* and its monstrous ilk from other wildlife can thus become over-reliant on exterior taxonomies, with attendant issues of anachronism and cultural imperialism. This problem replicates this project's larger challenges of identifying and analyzing the medieval "speculative," "fantastic," and/or "supernatural," discussed in the Introduction. As argued there, however, the speculative, as a mode, deals less in absolute categories than in the blending of realistically grounded features and imaginative deployments. It is relational rather than restrictive. In describing the *azhdahā* as a "monster" receptive to the types of analyses outlined above, I draw on its relationship to other denizens of the epic landscape, an ecosystem mediated by medieval Persian debates over the nature of supernatural beings.

A number of dangerous creatures populate the Persian epic genre. Such beasts are almost always physically removed from civilization, inhabitants of the wild landscape (*dasht*, "plain, steppe"; *marghzār*, "prairie"; *kuh*, "mountain"; *bisheh*, "grove, wood," etc.) Additionally, they are often removed in time. Encounters with them occur in a legendary past, when men (and sometimes women) contend with familiar animals—lions (*shir* or *hozhabr*), leopards (*palang*), tigers (*babr*),[69] and wolves (*gorg*), all of which survived in Central Asia into modern times—as well as with more exotic foes that could no longer be regularly encountered in the Transoxianan wilderness. This second set includes rhinoceroses (/"unicorns"; *karg* or *karkadan*) and *simorgh*

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[68] The closest modern Persian equivalent, *hayulā*, means "elementary substance" (Greek *húlē*) in Classical Persian. *Patyāreh*, discussed below, comes close, since it is applied to a range of terrifying creatures, from the humanoid to the draconic. But its essential meaning is a more generalized sense of affliction or evil, embodied sometimes in specific beasts. *Azhdahā* and *div* can both be loosely translated as "monster," but, as indicated here, they usually represent more specific teratological concepts.

[69] While the encyclopedists generally stuck to the meanings outlined here, in certain contexts the taxonomic specificity of these words for different members of *Panthera* could become blurred. *Shir* (technically *shēr*, as the word is still pronounced in Dari) came to signify "big cat" generally, particularly in India; and by the 19th century, the decimation of Indian lions led to *shir* being understood as "tiger." Hence many illustrated Indian *Shāhnāmeh*s of this period depict the epic's *shir* as tigers; and Kipling's Shere Khan is certainly "Lord Tiger."

(huge mammalian birds, somewhat akin to gryphons or phoenixes), as well as *div*, *nahang,* and *azhdahā*, discussed in more detail below.

These two groups of beasts—the prosaic and the fantastic—often appear intermingled in verse narrations of wilderness threats. And they undoubtedly share a great deal of overlap in the essential dynamics of their interactions with humans. Aristocratic champions who battled against any of these animals participated in a long-standing Middle Eastern tradition, dating back at least to Sumerian times.[70] Noble accoutrements such as horses and advanced weaponry often (if not always[71]) tipped the scales of the encounter in favor of the human combatant. As the prerogative of those who ruled over agricultural populations, elite slaughter of predators was "closely associated with notions of the fecundity and fertility of the earth." According to medieval records, this association was often quite literal: the depredations of lions, in particular, could severely impact both livestock populations and the basic willingness of peasants to labor in the fields. This made the *Chaoskampf* less a mythical metaphor than a straightforward policy; in slaughtering these creatures, leaders were seen as "fulfilling an important cosmological function."[72]

Given this ecological reality, it is fairly straightforward, as Thomas T. Allsen does, to position dragons as useful shorthand for a whole range of dangerous beasts; they are "synthetic creatures, amalgams of diverse zoological parts, …anomalies representing chaos, and their defeat represents a return to order."[73] Undoubtedly, as highlighted in my discussion of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* below, the experience of living with large predators and relying on elite warriors

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[70] Thomas T. Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 171-172.
[71] As late as 1905, a British officer named Major Carnegy, well-armed and participating in a large, organized hunt, was killed by a lion in India's Gir Forest ("Killed by a Lion in India, from the *Forfar Review*," *Press* LXII, no. 12273 (17 August 1905): 5).
[72] Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, 180.
[73] Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, 180.

to eliminate them informed epic accounts of *azhdahā*. But the speculative mode is crucially important here. Lions were readily-available opponents for noble cavaliers, in epics as in real life. But despite Bayhaqi's attempt to identify them with real wildlife, *azhdahā* were in fact present only in literary form. In depicting conflicts with *azhdahā* alongside or instead of struggles with more ordinary creatures, poets were doing more than introducing a little variety into their catalogues of feats. They were positioning these scenes further along a spectrum running from the quotidian through the rare and the unusual to the marvelous, the weird, and the monstrous.[74] This spectrum, moreover, is intimately connected to issues of temporality. Hunting a lion can happen in any kind of Persian text, up through memoirs of the early twentieth century. But fighting an *azhdahā* occurs primarily in romanticized accounts of the past, or of distant lands, and particularly in the verse epic genre. When *azhdahā* emerge, it is not out of commonplace fears but out of the unknown—the trackless wilderness, the seas, the past. Their presence alters the landscape of a text. Breaking the ontological order, it demands a distinct kind of engagement.

Similar issues attend the deployment of creatures such as the *div* and the *nahang*. Given the complex connections that exist between these entities and the *azhdahā*, it is worth examining both of them in some detail before considering the position that speculative beings held in medieval Persian literature, a reflection which concludes this introduction.

Etymologically, the ***div*** represent the Persian reflex of PIE *deywós, related to e.g. Latin *deus*, Greek *Zeus*, English *Tues*day. These are the beings referenced by Bayhaqi as a

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[74] This echoes the definition advanced by Chet Van Duzer: "For the purposes of this chapter, a monster will be defined as a creature that was thought astonishing and exotic (regardless of whether in fact it was real or mythical) in classical, medieval, or Renaissance times." (Chet Van Duzer, "*Hic sunt dracones:* The Geography and Cartography of Monsters," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman with Peter J. Dendle (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 387-435 (388).

commonplace of popular fantastic literature. But they are just as at home in sober histories, appearing in Bal'ami's translation of al-Ṭabarī's *History* as adaptations of that text's *shayāṭīn* ("devils"). The *div* are demonic entities, their name ultimately deriving from Zoroastrian terms for the "anti-created" minions of the demiurgic Ahriman—Avestan *daēuua-*, Old Pesian *daiva-*. In the wake of the Islamic conquests of the Iranian world, the *div*, together with their more beneficent cousins the *pari*, were linked to the Arabian concept of the *jinn*, a category of sentient, polymorphous beings whose existence is validated by the Qur'ān; as well as to the *ghūl*, a cannibalistic desert ogre. While the tradition of manuscript illumination eventually settled on a particular iconography for the *div*—hideous, hulking, often speckled and tailed, with zoomorphic heads[75]—this is not closely based on descriptions in the texts themselves. Rather, the *div* of classical Persian texts appear to partake in the widespread category of the "parahuman," human-like entities of uncanny and often hard-to-define otherness discussed in-depth in Chapter III of this dissertation.[76] Because this category lends itself naturally to interpenetration with the human, the "otherworld" inhabited by the *div* becomes a site deeply implicated in medieval Persian notions of origin and authenticity.[77] While *div* generally seem distinct from *azhdahā*, there are certain contexts—such as Rostam's encounter on the road to Māzāndarān, discussed below—in which these two monstrous species overlap or reinforce one another.

Another beast, employed more often in metaphor or generalized description than in direct action, is the ***nahang***. This aquatic animal is occasionally synonymized with the crocodile (Arabic: *timsaḥ*; in Modern Persian, the Arabic word has been adopted for this creature, while

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[75] This iconography is discussed in Francesca Leoni, "Picturing Evil: Images of *Div*s and the Reception of the *Shahnama*," in *Shahnama Studies II: The Reception of Firdausi's Shahnama*, ed. Charles Melville and Gabrielle van den Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 101-118.

[76] For my definition of this term, see pages 384-386.

[77] Sam Lasman, "Dangerous Authenticity: Otherworlds in Classical Persian Historiography and Epic," in *Persian Literature as World Literature,* ed. Mostafa Abedinifard, Omid Azadibougar, and Amirhossein Vafa (London: Bloomsbury Academic (Literatures as World Literature series), *forthcoming*).

nahang now means "whale"). However, the classical *nahang* is more properly considered a water monster of variable taxonomy, "one that drags down" (from Avestan **ni-θanj-*[78]), referring to its habit of wrenching prey beneath the surface into oblivion. Many analyses insist on the essential unity of the dragon and sea monster as cultural concepts, since dragons are seen as possessing a primordial connection to water.[79] And there can certainly be a degree of overlap in meaning between the *azhdahā* and the *nahang*. Writers and copyists occasionally regarded them as interchangeable[80] or synonymous, particularly as descriptors for warriors' ferocity in battle. Both, likewise, appear in metaphors and figures of speech associated with eclipses, implacable fate and/or calamity. As reptilian beasts associated with the wilderness, *azhdahā* and *nahang* are not usually direct sites of categorical confusion between the human and nonhuman,[81] though as this chapter will discuss, the *azhdahā* is much closer to its human adversaries than it may at first seem. Unlike the *div,* neither creature possesses societies; they tend to be either solitary or swarms, lacking social relations. Impossible to tame or reason with, they are invariably hostile.

However, there are key differences between these two classes of monster, reinforcing the semantic specificity of each. *Nahang* are regularly described as the prey of the *azhdahā,* but there are few if any instances of reciprocal predation. The zone of the hero's encounter with the *azhdahā* is always on land, whereas the aquatic *nahang* is almost never confronted directly.

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[78] Henrik Samuel Nyberg, *A Manual of Pahlavi II: Ideograms, Glossary, Abbreviations, Index, Grammatical Survey, Corrigenda to Part I* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974), 138; Johnny Cheung, *Etymological Dictionary of the Iranian Verb* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 391-392.

[79] E.g., Joseph Fontenrose's *Python* claims that even those dragons who do not display maritime characteristics "in the surviving versions" of their tales are in fact "spirits from the vasty deep" (Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1959), 142).

[80] For instance, in Nezāmi's verse romance *Haft Peykar* ("Seven Portraits"); as Bahrām Gur spurs toward his draconic opponent, the edited text reads "the king came against the *azhdahā* like a *nahang*," but at least one manuscript reverses the nouns—"the king came like an *azhdahā* against the *nahang*" (Jamal al-Din Abu Mohammad Elyās ebn-e Yusof ebn-e Zakki Nezāmi Ganjavi, *Haft Peykar,* ed. Tāher Ahmad Awghli Muharramuf (Moscow: Enteshārāt-e Dānesh, 1987), 134.)

[81] Recall Cohen's "Thesis III: The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis" (Cohen, "Seven Theses, 6-7).

Perhaps the sole instance in which a hero takes up arms against the *nahang*, the episode of the Akvān-e Div in the *Shāhnāmeh*, features the indomitable Rostam barely escaping from being devoured by a pack of voracious leviathans, after a shape-shifting *div* flings him into the water.[82] The framing of this scene suggests that the *nahang*'s monstrosity consists of the destabilizing and decentering of human (and particularly heroic) agency. Yet the *azhdahā* is also, at times, capable of highlighting links between predation and mortality/manliness/*mardi*. This theme will resurface below, particularly in reference to the shocking conclusion of the *Bahmannāmeh*.

But however unsettling, the threat of the *nahang* is confined to the aquatic realm, where few ever venture. The *azhdahā* is a far more ubiquitous danger. Uniquely in the Persian legendary bestiary, it instantiates virtually every disaster that the nonhuman world can wreak upon human society: tempest, flood, wildfire, pestilence (including, as in the figure of Zahhāk, cancerous body horror), carnivorous predation, and eclipse (more social occasion than disaster for us, but regarded as a calamity by the vast majority of premodern cultures.) The *azhdahā*'s emergence in legendary history at the dawn of socio-technological modernity, as presented in the *Shāhnāmeh*, allows it to become a figure for the fascination and peril inherent in both nature and humanity once the two come to be viewed as separate (often across the artificial divide of culture). Itself a hybrid creature, possessing disturbingly anthropomorphic traits, the *azhdahā* highlights the degree to which conflict with the natural world is a symptom of humanity's self-conscious removal from it.

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[82] Abolqāsem Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, Vol. 3*, ed. Jalāl Khāleqi-Motlaq (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1371 [1992]), 292-293.

A Question of Monsters

      The intellectual climate in which Ferdowsi and his successors produced their poems was one in which supernatural creatures were sites of contestation, not naively accepted truths. As previously discussed, al-Ṭabarī euhemerized away the draconic aspects of al-Ḍaḥḥāk. The only unusual serpent in his *Ta'rīkh* is the Qur'ānically-sanctioned creature into which Mūsā (Moses) transforms his staff, to confound Pharaoh.[83] The polymath al-Bīrūnī, a somewhat younger contemporary of Ferdowsi, claimed that Persian as a language was constitutionally unfit for relaying sober information, being good only for "fables and bedtime stories."[84] He seems particularly to have had in mind accounts of wondrous creatures and magical happenings, such as those in *Hazār Afsāneh* ("A Thousand Legends," the now-lost precursor to *Alf Layla wa Layla*, "The Thousand and One Nights.") As mentioned above, Bayhaqi also drew a divide between the fantasies that the masses preferred and the rational histories that a more sophisticated audience knew to value. Against this backdrop, advocating for the literary value of the speculative represents a critique of narrowly euhemerist (or, perhaps, more generally positivist) views of how the past should be understood. Classical Persian verse epic re-enchanted history without rendering it inconsequential; indeed, the *Shāhnāmeh* came to be considered fully on-par with al-Ṭabarī's masterpiece across the medieval Islamic world.[85]

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[83] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, 404, quoting Qur'ān 26:30-32. The creature is called a *tha'bān* ("serpent"), which al-Ṭabarī glosses as "*adh-dhakru min al-ḥayyāti*," "the male of the snake"—*tha'bān* being a masculine noun and *ḥayya* feminine.

[84] Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī, *Kitāb al-ṣaydana fī al-ṭibb*, ed. 'Abbās Zaryāb-Khuy (Tehrān: Markaz-e Nashr-e Dāneshgāhi, 1370 [1991]), 14. This view was far from universal, even among avowed intellectuals—ibn Sinā's *Dāneshnāmeh-ye 'Alā'i*, written some decades after Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh*, employed Persian to discuss a range of advanced philosophical topics. But al-Bīrūnī's dismissal testifies, at the very least, to the existence of a debate.

[85] For instance, ibn al-Athīr's anecdote of the mocking question Maḥmūd of Ghazna asked the deposed Majd al-Dawla of Rayy, wondering how he had failed to learn the lessons of the past: "'Haven't you read *Shāhnāma*, the history of the Persians, and al-Ṭabarī's *History*, the history of the Muslims?'" ('Alī 'Izz al-Din ibn al-Athīr al-Jazarī, *al-Kāmil fī-l-Ta'rīkh*, IX, ed. C. J. Tornberg (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1386 [1966]), 371).

This is not to say that these texts settled the Perso-Arabic debate over the propriety of the fantastic. Ferdowsi himself occasionally feels obligated to explain that the supernatural elements of his tales need not be taken literally. Halfway through his fifty thousand verses, he pauses the account of Rostam's battle with the Akvān-e Div to point out: "*to mar div rā mardom-e bad shenās / kasi k-u nadārad ze yazdān sepās / har ān k-u gozasht az rah-e mardomi / ze divān shomar, mashmarash z-ādami*"[86] ("By '*div*' [demon], you should understand 'evil person,' / one who has no thanks for God / Anyone who strays from the path of mankind / count him among the *div*, do not count him among humans.") It is hard to understand these lines except in the context of an insistence, against some opposition, that mythical creatures are not simple wisps but are rather "good to think with." Just because one does not regularly encounter giant shapeshifting ogres, Ferdowsi suggests, does not mean that literature about them cannot be used to consider the challenges eternally posed by human evil. At the same time, no other legendary creature in the *Shāhnāmeh* (or, indeed, in later epics) receives such an explanation. By and large, the mythic menagerie is left to speak for itself.

Instead of seeking to explain away the *azhdahā* as a philological fossil or straightforward symbol, I have argued that it is more fruitful to situate it alongside the other speculative beings that populate texts in which it appears. This consideration of the classical Persian teratological imagination positions the *azhdahā* within its natural (literary) ecosystem, beholden less to ancient mythic taxonomies or to specific political projects than to medieval narrative interests and exigencies. Considering these creatures as literary creations in turn suggests ways in which modern critical studies of the monstrous and weird, as outlined above, can provide helpful lenses and lexicons with which to approach the *azhdahā*.

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[86] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, III,* 296-297.

The *azhdahā*, the "snake-man" rooted in Avestan myth and radically reconceptualized in the efflorescence of New Persian, represents a site of richly productive tension between these two different articulations of monstrosity. At times, it strives towards being understood as fundamentally human, underneath the theriomorphic integument; at others, it presents itself as fundamentally other, a Thackerian demon devoted to eviscerating the lie of human centrality. It usually fails in both of these efforts, rigorously denied humanity by the efforts of boundary-setting heroes, pushed back beyond the margins it seeks to dissolve. Yet its persistent appearances speak to the ongoing interest of medieval Persian authors in the same issues that fascinate monster theorists and weird theorists alike. Drawing on the insights of both these camps, we can recognize the *azhdahā* of Persian epic not as the product of unthinking adherence to ancient fables or superstitions but rather as an open literary question (or maw; or wound).

While informed by and referring to the critical stances raised in this introduction, my readings below aim to demonstrate ways in which medieval Persian depictions of the monstrous both complicate and exceed analyses based largely in Euro-American and/or modern fictions. In the following analysis, I begin by examining the *azhdahā*'s emergence as a literary term in the genre-defining *Shāhnāmeh* of Abolqāsem Ferdowsi ("Book of Kings," completed c. 1010 CE). Over the millennia-long history of the pre-Islamic Iranian monarchy, Ferdowsi deploys the *azhdahā* as a monstrous instantiation of the cumulative tensions within human civilization. Following this, I explore how the conventions established in Ferdowsi's poem are extended or challenged in later epics. The *Garshāspnāmeh* of ʿAli ebn-e Ahmad Asadi-Tusi ("Book of Garshāsp," c. 1066 CE) is structured around three combats between its hero and *azhdahā*, which thus become personalized emblems of mortality. Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l-Khayr's revisionist epic, *Bahmannāmeh* ("Book of Bahman," c. 1108) violently overthrows convention by depicting its

eponymous king's brutal death in the maw of an *azhdahā*. Finally, I conclude with a study of how a later anonymous text, the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* ("Story of the Raging Tiger," c. 1600??) both participates in and adapts the tropological landscapes of its predecessors.

In the *azhdahā*, the Persian poets whose works are discussed in this chapter found a figure for their engagement with spatiotemporal alterity. A hybrid incorporating human and non-human forces, an implacable destroyer, an object of wonder, it became the ideal foil for heroes whose careers shape the past into recognizable narrative shapes. By fighting *azhdahā*, these champions seek to suture ancient and present time. But returning from their battles, clad in reptilian hides and trained in animalistic ferocity, they—like Bayhaqi's serpentine skin, adorning Mahmud's gate at Ghaznin—only embed irreducible strangeness at the heart of their societies.

Part I.

Emergent Monstrosity and Draconic Chronology: *Azhdahā* in the *Shāhnāmeh*

Abolqāsem Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh* ("Book of Kings"), completed in 378 SH (1010 CE), is perhaps the longest poem ever written by a single poet. In roughly fifty thousand *masnavi* couplets, it narrates a legendary history of *Irānzamin*—the realm of Iran—from the reign of the first king, Gayomart, down to the Islamic conquests of the first/seventh century. The authoritative modern edition, a monumental effort spearheaded by Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh and completed in 1386 SH (2008 CE), runs to eight volumes, though past versions could be considerably longer—up to roughly sixty thousand lines. A significant part of Khaleghi-Motlagh's editorial work consisted of trimming away verses that he determined were not part of Ferdowsi's core text. These accretions came about through rhetorical elaboration, scribal glossing, and, most significantly, the incorporation of works by later poets into the body of the *Shāhnāmeh* as it proliferated across the centuries and the Islamicate world.[87] Composed in the same *motaqāreb* meter and an identical epic diction, these "secondary epics" included both poems by named authors, such as the *Garshāspnāmeh*, and anonymous interpolations such as the

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[87] There are exponentially more manuscripts of the *Shāhnāmeh* than there are of the other medieval texts discussed in this dissertation; "perhaps thousands," suggests Franklin Lewis, "…over the past millennium, before the printing press came into general use for Persian in the nineteenth century" (Franklin Lewis, "A Book of Kings as the King of Books: The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi," in *A Companion to World Literature*, online edition, ed. Ken Seigneurie with Susan Andrade, Chris Lupke, B. Venkat Mani, Wen-chin Ouyang, and Dan Selden (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118635193.ctwl0103, 5). In preparing his edition, Khaleghi-Motlagh relied primarily on "only" twelve foundational manuscripts, dating between 614 SH/1217 CE and 894 SH/1489 CE (Jalāl Khāleqi-Motlaq [Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh], "Dast-nevis-hā-ye Asās-e Tas'hih-e In Daftar," in *Shāhnāmeh, Vol. I*, ed. Jalāl Khāleqi-Motlaq (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1366 [1987]), 33); this number alone considerably exceeds the manuscript tally for any of the European texts in Chapters I or III. While my claims throughout this project are not rooted in the sorts of arguments that equate circulation and popularity with literary significance, the *Shāhnāmeh*'s immense proliferation is an unavoidably important feature of its textual history.

Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān. While both of these texts are considered separately below, it is worth

remembering that for much of the *Shāhnāmeh*'s millennium-long reception, these and other

works were often seamlessly woven into its endlessly capacious structure, and a reader would

not necessarily have known them to be separate objects of analysis.

The *Shāhnāmeh* narrates the reigns of fifty monarchs, each with their conquests,

sociocultural achievements, and intrafamilial struggles. As such it does not have a unitary plot,

and resists summary. Its cohesion arises rather at the thematic level, and through large-scale

patterns that inflect its sweeping historical panorama. One traditional way of parsing the poem

has been through dynasties. It begins with the *Pishdādiān*, primordial kings who invent the

institutions of imperial civilization while overcoming the nefarious *div*, the monstrous minions of

Ahriman.[88] Their earliest scions are kings of the entire world, but later this unified realm is

divided into three—*Turān* to the east (roughly Central Asia/the steppe, sometimes equated to

Chin, "China," and/or *Torkestān*, "land of the Turks"); *Rum* ("Rome"/Byzantium) to the west;

and *Irān* in between. In time, the *Pishdādiān* are succeeded by the *Kayāniān*. These legendary

rulers oversee some key cultural shifts, including the rise of the prophet *Zardosht*

(Zarathustra/Zoroaster) and widescale conversion to his faith.[89] Constantly engaged in warfare

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[88] In orthodox Zoroastrianism, Ahriman (as he is called in Middle and New Persian; from Avestan *Angra Mainyu*, "destructive spirit") is the representative of ultimate evil, antithesis and opponent of Ohrmazd (*Ahura Mazda*, "lord of wisdom"). Ohrmazd's perfect creation is infected by Ahriman's evil, but also provides a sphere in which Ahriman can be confronted and ultimately defeated, a victory that will herald the end of time (*frashgird*, "restoration" to the initial state of unified perfection.) Ahriman's reception into Islamic New Persian literature is complex and understudied. At times he is treated as the equivalent of *Eblis*, the Islamic Satan (either a *jinn* or an angel, depending on the school of interpretation, who refused God's command to bow down to Adam; Sufis often regard this as proof of Eblis's unparalleled love for God, and so make him the prototypic mystic lover of the divine). But the *Shāhnāmeh* features both Ahriman (as the offstage "Big Bad," particularly during the early battles, and as a physical demon subdued and ridden by King Tahmurat) and Eblis (as the shape-shifting deceiver who tempts Zahhāk into evil). Their relationship is not explained, leaving the widely differing doctrinal claims of Zoroastrianism and Islam unreconciled.

[89] The subject of the Iranians' pre-Zoroastrian faith is not addressed directly; fundamentally, many of them (particularly heroes like Rostam) seem to be righteous worshipers of a single God (referred to as *yazdān, khodā(vand)*, *āfaridegār*, etc.) and so, perhaps, can be considered *ḥunafā'*. Later folktales explicitly made Rostam and his compatriots devout Muslims.

against Turān, the *Kayāniān* are eventually overthrown by a conqueror from Rum— *Eskandar* (Alexander the Great), depicted here as the secret half-brother of the last Kayanid. After several centuries of divided rule under the *Ashkāniān* (Parthians), which Ferdowsi passes over in a handful of lines, a new, glorious dynasty, the *Sāsāniān*, emerge. In time, however, their empire degenerates into a corrupt and strife-ridden polity, and ultimately falls to the bearers of a new religion—the Arab armies of Islam, whose triumph concludes the epic.

The epochs of the *Pishdādiān*, *Kayāniān*, and *Sāsāniān* have been described as *mythical*, *legendary*, and *historical*, respectively.[90] These designations are often more impressionistic than exact. Both *Pishdādiān* and *Kayāniān* kings betray etymological links to characters from the *Avesta* and/or Indo-Iranian mythology; certain figures of the *Kayāniān* era, such as Zardosht and Dārā (Dārayavaush/Darius III) have at least some historical basis, while many of the ostensibly historical *Sāsāniān* engage in feats fully as fantastic as those of their predecessors. But there is a general movement in the epic from an era in which the primary villains are demoniacal monsters, to one in which the heroes face off against human enemies, to one in which it is no longer entirely clear which combatants are the heroes and which are the villains. The Arab conquest at the poem's ending has been read both as the tragic downfall of a glorious civilization and as the righteous victory of the true faith over a debauched and dissolute tyranny. Ferdowsi himself was a devout Shi'ite, opening the work with exuberant praise of God and the Prophet, but he drew heavily (albeit likely at some remove) on non-Islamic sources—the overall structure of the poem

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[90] This formulation is so ubiquitous that I am unaware of its origin. In Persian, the equivalent terms are *asātiri* ("mythical, legendary"; actually a borrowing via Arabic from Greek *historía*); *pahlavāni* ("heroic"; originally meaning "Parthian," but already by Ferdowsi's day this specific referent had been forgotten, and the word simply referred generally to the champions of old; today it is often applied to traditional Indian and Iranian wrestling); and *tārikhi* (from the Arabic *ta'rīkh*, "history," literally "fixing the date of an event").

is specifically indebted to apocalyptic Zoroastrian works of the tenth century,[91] which depicted the coming of Islam as a calamity that only messianic intervention would redeem. A certain ambivalence is worked into the poem's fabric.

The *azhdahā* plays a key role in this scheme. These creatures suture the poem, appearing in all three of the "sections" outlined above and mentioned well over a hundred times.[92] In the Introduction to this chapter, I have argued that for Ferdowsi and his contemporaries, this word had not yet achieved currency as a general descriptor of reptilian beasts. Rather, it retained a specific connection to the tyrant Zahhāk, and so connoted hybridity; specifically, a monstrosity that grows from within, and retains vestiges of, human bodies. In what follows, I will trace the emergence of the *azhdahā* within Ferdowsi's legendary history, and argue that the creatures' periodic manifestations structure the poem's depiction of humanity's place within time and nature. Appearing concurrently with the epic's vision of societal modernity, these monsters interrogate the stakes of human mastery over the world, as manifested through aristocratic rule. The *azhdahā* both surface tensions between animalistic fury and technological sophistication, and require that their would-be slayers themselves embody these conflicting modes. Over the course of the poem, these beasts' ongoing zoological variability reflects processes of temporal change that heroes struggle—and ultimately fail—to contain. Never reducible to a single symbolic role, they resist unified readings, and so suggest the monstrously unnarratable nature of history.

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[91] Particularly, as discussed in the General Introduction, the *Ayādgār-ī Jāmāspīg* ("The Remembering of Jāmāsp"), in which the eponymous prophetic sage recites the history of the world from creation to apocalypse (see pages 41-43 and 200, note 11).

[92] Fritz Wolff's 1935 *Glossar zu Ferdosis Schahname* claims over 200 uses (Fritz Wolff, *Glossar zu Ferdosis Schahname* (Berlin: Hildesheim, 1965), 57), though this number is based on the edition of Julius von Mohl.

1. Mythic Reticulations: Early *Azhdahā* in the *Shāhnāmeh*

The first use of the word in Ferdowsi's text echoes Rudaki's employment of it as a metaphor for warrior prowess. Praising his dedicatee Sultan Mahmud (the same monarch whose Indian expedition resulted in Bayhaqi's *azhdahā*), the poet describes the king with a pair of images: "*beh bazm andarun āsemān-e vafā-st / beh razm andarun tiz-chang azhdahā-st*" ("at the feast, he's the heaven of fidelity / in the fight, he's the sharp-clawed *azhdahā*.")[93] The quintessential opposition of *bazm* and *razm* defines the poles of royal activity; within each of these spheres, the Sultan is superlative, vast, all-encompassing. As a warrior, he manifests inescapable ferocity, with *tiz-chang*, "sharp-clawed," suggesting a predator's penetrating grip. Whereas Rudaki had only used *azhdahā* for his patron's enemies, Ferdowsi expands the word's sense beyond a purely adversarial connotation. Complicating the issue are a number of legends which describe Ferdowsi's relationship to Mahmud as essentially hostile, and reading in those terms, this line could be a dig at the monarch's rapaciousness. But the tales describing this animosity are late and highly suspect on historical grounds. Throughout his epic, Ferdowsi uses the metaphoric *azhdahā* for protagonists and antagonists alike; his successors likewise take up this dual valence as an integral part of their poetics. Ferdowsi's *azhdahā* thus become unmoored from a binary morality, even while physical manifestations of the beast almost always oppose his heroes (with a single exception, Bozorjmehr's wondrous serpent, discussed below).

At the same time, this re-orientation of the word should not be understood as de-fanging it. The hero-as-*azhdahā* becomes, in the moment of battle, quintessentially a monster, a

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[93] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 16.

destroyer, a devourer. As the paired image of Mahmud as a beneficent sky suggests, most champions are capable of shedding this dread visage in peacetime. But the threat of becoming-draconic always lurks behind aristocratic power, which derives from a mastery of irresistible force. Righteous lords deploy this capability for righteous ends, drawing on reserves of inner chaos to promote order. But the danger always remains that the draconic will slip its leash; indeed, the *Shāhnāmeh* is rife with depictions of once-noble rulers who fall into despotism. The simile of the *azhdahā* instantiates this vision of authority, and by virtue of its historical and textual priority, it is alongside this recurrent image that all narrative instantiations of the beast itself must be set.

Epic poets, in Persian as in other traditions, often sing of warfare and bloody deeds. They sometimes seem to revel in Tarantino-esque, blow-by-blow descriptions of battlefield maimings, and celebrate the men and women who perform these acts. But this does not mean that they are unaware of the dehumanizing toll of violence. The price of heroism is frequently horrific, and it is telling that Ferdowsi's greatest champion, Rostam, suffers perhaps the most excruciating death in the epic, slowly bleeding out in a spike-filled pit.[94] And while fighters are compared to plenty of other beasts in the course of the epic—elephants, lions, leopards, *nahang*—these metaphors remain safely figurative. Rostam may be *pil-tan,* "elephant-bodied," but he never metamorphoses into a pachyderm.[95] The same cannot be said for the *azhdahā*, which first appears by literally erupting from the body of a young nobleman. In this hybrid creature, Persian poets found an apt figure for the terrible transformation that humans undergo in combat. The rest of the *Shāhnāmeh*

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[94] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *V*, 452-455.

[95] That said, an elephant-visaged berserker, Kush-e Pilgush, appears as the main character of Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l-Khayr's *Kushnāmeh*, suggesting that Iranian poets following Ferdowsi remained interested in the monstrous literalization of metaphor (Hakim Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l-Khayr, *Kushnāmeh*, ed. Jalāl Matini (Tehrān: Enteshārāt-e 'Elmi, 1377 [1998-1999]).

features plenty of fully embodied *azhdahā*, and it is on these that the remainder of this analysis will focus. But it is important to note this first reference in the poem's exordium, which makes a single blended image of monster and warrior.

In contrast to the figure of the primordial chaos-serpent imagined by Indo-Europeanist mythographers, the *azhdahā* does not seem to be present at the earliest strata of Ferdowsi's mythic history. When the first king Gayomart and his grandson Hushang gather all of creation—all *jānevar*, "soul-bearers"—into battle against Ahriman's *div*, "*pari o palang anjoman kard o shir / ze dorrandegān gorg o babr-e delir*" (fairies and leopards he gathered, and lions / and from the predators, wolves and bold tigers.)[96] Many of these creatures (particularly lions and wolves) will reappear in later episodes of the poem as the antagonists of human heroes, their unity against the *div* either a temporary truce or an Edenic state later broken by the advance of civilization. But *azhdahā* are not mentioned here, on either side.

Where are they? If Ferdowsi is as indebted to Zoroastrian mythology as he is sometimes made out to be, then we might expect all reptiles to be considered Ahrimanic *xrafstar*, wicked vermin that the righteous are duty-bound to destroy. In the *Avesta*, *Aži Dahāka* is explicitly a daevic creature, and his etymological offspring the *azhdahā* might be expected to share the association. However, all the creatures mentioned in this passage as Gayomart's allies were, as predatory destroyers of livestock, in fact considered Ahrimanic in traditional Zoroastrian thought.[97] Operating within an Islamic framework, however, the poet was able to redraw the battle-lines of this cosmic struggle.

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[96] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I,* 24.
[97] Mahnaz Moazami, "Mammals iii. The Classification of Mammals and the Other Animal Classes according to Zoroastrian Tradition," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition (2015), http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mammals-03-in-zoroastrianism.

Could the *azhdahā* have sided with Gayomart and Hushang? That this is not an idle question is indicated by the answer that at least one *Shāhnāmeh* illuminator provided. A late 17th century Indian copy of the epic at the British Library (BL Additional 6610) depicts Hushang's cavalry charging into battle against an array of chimeric demons. In the protagonists' vanguard are several big cats, a resplendent *simorgh* (the phoenix- or gryphon-like "king of the birds"), and a hissing *azhdahā*.[98] This depiction of the serpent as aligned with the forces of creation against the armies of Ahriman indicates just how far later readers of the *Shāhnāmeh* could stray from Zoroastrian hermeneutics, even if there is nothing in the extant text that outright supports such an interpretation.[99] However, Ferdowsi himself does endorse readings of his text as distinct from ancient tradition by explicitly including among humanity's allies not only a selection of *xrafstar* but also the *pari*, originally malevolent female succubi (Avestan *pairikā-*) but reimagined, by some point in the Islamic era, as beautiful and beneficent fairies.[100]

Maybe the *azhdahā*, like the lions and wolves, originally sided with creation against uncreation. However, an alternate possibility arises from the text. Perhaps the *azhdahā* did not participate in this primordial battle because they did not yet exist. Shortly after Gayomart and Hushang's victory, the latter discovers fire in the course of an encounter with a fearsome serpent:

Yeki ruz shāh-e jahān su-ye kuh / gozar kard bā chand kas ham-goruh

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[98] BL Additional 6610, British Library, London. A reproduction of this image is available via the *Shahnama Project*'s database: http://shahnama.lib.cam.ac.uk/new/jnama/card/ceillustration:1018264351 (Charles Melville, dir., Shahnama Project, Cambridge).

[99] At least one modern illustrated version of the *Shāhnāmeh* follows suit, portraying *azhdahā* both at Gayomart's court and participating in his battles (Abolqāsem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Epic of the Persian Kings*, ill. Hamid Rahmanian, trans. Ahmad Sadri, ed. Melissa Hibbard (New York: The Quantuck Lane Press, 2013), 12).

[100] The etymology and cultural development of this term are traced by Siamak Adhami, "Pairikā," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition (2010), http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/pairika. Adhami's findings reveal a sharp break between overwhelmingly negative usage in the pre-Islamic era and overwhelmingly positive usage in the Islamic period. The few positive mentions in Zoroastrian texts are in works like the *Ayādgār-ī Jāmāspīg*, which seem on balance to post-date the Islamic conquests (see pages 41-43, 200 note 11, and 235). The reasons for this reversal are mysterious; the possibility of influence from the far more ambivalent Arabian *jinn*, or even Hellenistic nymphs and their ilk, cannot be ruled out.

Padid āmad az dur chizi derāz / seyah-rang o tireh-tan o tiz-nāz
Do cheshm az bar-e sar chu do cheshmeh khun / ze dud-e dahān-ash jahān tireh-gun
Negah kard hushang bā hush o sang / gereft-ash yeki sang o shod tiz-chang
...
Nashod mār koshteh valiken ze rāz / azān tab'-e sang ātesh āmad farāz[101]

(One day, the world-king passed by a mountain with some of his retinue
Something long appeared far-off—black-colored, dark-bodied, sharp in cunning
Two eyes on the front of its head like two wells of blood; the world grew dark from its
    mouth's smoke
Hushang looked at it with wit and weight; he took up a stone and grew fierce [lit. "sharp-
    clawed"]
…
The snake was not killed, but out of concealment, from that stone's nature sprang fire.")

Here, many of the reptile's qualities match descriptions later given to *azhdahā*: its mountain habitat, threatening aspect, blood-colored eyes, and fiery breath. But in this early era, it seems as though Hushang and his retinue do not know what to call the animal—at first it is just *chizi*, "something," and even after the encounter it is only referred to as a *mār*, a snake. Hushang himself, notably, is described as *tiz-chang*, the same descriptor given to Mahmud-as-*azhdahā* in the exordium. The text carefully balances his intelligence and royal dignity (*hush o sang*) with his protective ferocity, but the confrontation is over nearly as soon as it begins. Unknowable, the monster escapes,[102] and humanity is left with the gift of fire—practically derived from the sparks struck by Hushang's stone, though certainly associated with the smoke-belching serpent. The hostility that will come to define interactions between humans and large predators has not yet frozen into zero-sum mortal combat; both parties in this encounter gesture towards becoming-*azhdahā*, though neither has yet achieved it. That will have to wait for the appearance of Zahhāk.

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[101] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I,* 30. Khaleghi-Motlagh in fact relegates this passage to the footnotes.
[102] As discussed in the Introduction, "The Monster Always Escapes" is the title of Cohen's second monster thesis (Cohen, "Monster Culture," 4), arguing that the monster combines corporeal and incorporeal (trace) manifestations.

Ferdowsi makes this character an Arab prince who finds the spur for his evil ambitions in the whisperings of a certain courtier—actually *Eblis*, Satan, in disguise. Under Eblis's incitements, Zahhāk murders his father, usurps the throne, and turns from his vegetarian diet to eating meat cooked up by the devil himself. Eblis's next request is simply to kiss the king's shoulders; Zahhāk grants this boon, unaware of the consequences:

Bebusid va shod dar zamin nāpadid / kas andar jahān in shegefti nadid
Do mār-e seyāh az do ketf-ash berost / ghami gasht v-az har suyi chāreh jost
Saranjām beborid har do ze keft / sazad gar bemāni bedin dar shegeft
Chu shākh-e derakht ān do mār-e seyāh / bar āmad degar-bāreh az ketf-e shāh
…
Be-sān-e bezeshki pas eblis taft / beh farzānegi nazd-e zahhāk raft
Bedu goft k-in budani kār bud / bemān tā cheh gardad nabāyad dorud
Khwaresh sāz o ārāmeshān deh beh khward / nabāyad joz-in chāreh-i niz kard
Be-joz maghz-e mardom madeh-shān khwaresh / magar khod bemirand azin parvaresh
Sar-e narreh divān azin jost-o-juy / cheh jost o cheh did andarin goft-o-guy
Magar tā yeki chāreh sāzad nehān / keh pardakht mānad ze mardom jahān[103]

(He kissed him, and vanished into the ground; no one on earth had seen such a wonder
Two black snakes rose from his two shoulders; stunned, he searched everywhere for a
  remedy
At last he cut off both from his shoulders (it's right for you to be astonished by this!)
Like tree branches, those two black snakes grew back yet again from the king's shoulders
…
Then in a physician's form, Eblis strolled in and went up to Zahhāk with a learned air
Said to him, "This situation is as it must be; stay, whatever happens, there's no use in
  cutting.[104]
Prepare food, and calm them by feeding; you mustn't do any remedy but this.
Give them nothing to eat but people's brains; hopefully, they will die from this
  treatment."
What was the head of the mighty demons seeking from this inquiry? What did he
  perceive in this conversation,
Except that secretly he could arrange a scheme to make the world emptied of people?)

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[103] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 50-51.
[104] Perhaps with a pun on "prayer": *dorowd* vs *dorud*.

Laurie Pierce notes that this eruptive event "marks a turning point after which the borders between the human and the demonic are effectively obscured."[105] The serpents emerging from Zahhāk's shoulders "connect two disparate notions of the demonic at work in the *Shahnameh*: the Islamic emphasis on the demonic as a force of temptation, and the Zoroastrian conception of the demonic as physical destruction," with the appearance of Eblis (as opposed to Ahriman) emphasizing a notion of Edenic temptation.[106] While Pierce is tracing the epic's development of *div* rather than *azhdahā*, her identification of the radical break that this moment represents applies generally to the poem's depiction of monstrosity. And without necessarily mapping the dichotomy between demonic menace and demonic temptation onto an opposition between Iranian and Semitic religions (one of the leading *div*, according to Zoroastrian doctrine, was *Āz*, "Lust"[107]), it seems right to locate this defining moment of becoming-monster in a tension between possession and destruction.

Where al-Ṭabarī had offered the (semi-)rationalized account of cancerous ganglia salved by brains, Ferdowsi fully embraces the scene's fantastic potential. His aside, *sazad gar bemāni bedin dar shegeft* ("it's right for you to be astonished by this!") both highlights the strangeness of Zahhāk's transformation and embeds his audience in the terrified confusion of the king and his court. Crucially, the snakes do not at first do anything other than grow; explicitly compared to tree branches, they are almost as vegetal as they are animal. Their crude tumescence also foreshadow's Zahhāk's sexual rapacity, discussed below; Franklin Lewis refers to them as

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[105] Laurie Pierce, "Serpents and Sorcery: Humanity, Gender, and the Demonic in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*," *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 349-367 (352).
[106] Pierce, "Serpents," 356; this point is emphasized by Franklin Lewis, "Shifting Allegiances: Primordial Relationships and How They Change in the *Shahnameh*," in *The Layered Heart: Essays on Persian Poetry. A Celebration in Honor of Dick Davis*, ed. A. A. Seyed-Ghorab (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2019), 392.
[107] J. P. Asmussen, "Āz," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, III/2 (2011): 168-169, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/az-iranian-demon.

"slithery phallic symbols of danger and despoliation."[108] Eblis's proposed remedy for the growths then heightens the horror—Zahhāk is forced to become a cannibal, for as long as the serpents survive (the king is either extraordinarily patient, or comes to accept his demonic parasites and their anthropophagy; he, and they, reign for a thousand years.) A pair of brain-eating snakes may not be a very efficient scheme for depopulating the planet, but Eblis's plan seems to extend beyond this particular act. In turning the human prince into a hybrid beast, he has implanted a vector towards horrific alterity within the flesh of the soon-to-be world king. The unprecedented threat of becoming-monster now hangs over humanity; a world ruled by such a creature and subject to its appetites (both gustatory and sexual) is already well on its way to becoming emptied of people (*mardom*) in favor of some other mode of being.[109]

Why do the snakes require brains for food? While the brain-eating zombies of modern pop culture are not particularly old, traceable not even to Romero's genre-making *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) but to Dan O'Bannon's parodic *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985),[110] we can perhaps assume that the gruesome sense of taboo violation is trans-historical. For these modern ghouls, the consumption of brains represents both a futile attempt to regain their own subjectivity and, cyclically, their homicidal wish to deny it to others. Intriguingly, Ferdowsi need not have had a vastly different conception; medieval Islamic medicine identified the brain as the seat of both memory and imagination.[111] By consuming his subjects' brains, the tyrant denies them the ability to envision alternate systems, even as he approaches a Foucauldian dream of pan-perceptive knowledge.

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[108] Lewis, "Shifting Allegiances," 396.

[109] We might recall that in the *Yashts*, Aži Dahāk himself prays for the de-population of the world; here, he has become the unwitting tool of a greater power.

[110] Dan O'Bannon, dir., *The Return of the Living Dead*; Los Angeles, CA: Hemdale Film Corporation, 1985.

[111] Simon Kemp and Garth J. O. Fletcher, "The Medieval Theory of the Inner Senses," *The American Journal of Psychology* 106, no. 4 (Winter, 1993): 564-565.

Only after Zahhāk's transformation does Ferdowsi invoke the term *azhdahā* within his narrative. The ruler is now described as *por az howl shāh azhdahā-peykar*—"terrifying *azhdahā* - bodied king"; three lines later, as *azhdahā-fash*, "*azhdahā* -like"; eight lines after that, simply as *azhdahā*.[112] The three-fold repetition in such a short space both emphasizes the word's novelty within the epic and associates it indelibly with the king's monstrous hybrid body. Even as Zahhāk spreads his influence across the world, capturing and brutally executing his predecessor Jamshid, the concept of the *azhdahā* likewise grows, from something half-glimpsed through analogy (via the qualifiers -*peykar* and -*fash*) to a fully embodied horror. The first physical manifestation of the *azhdahā* in Persian epic is an unholy fusion of human and reptile; a satanically bioengineered innovation that, intentionally or not, remains faithful to the word's etymology, "Snake-Man." At the same time, if these lines are taken as presenting the poet's embodied definition of the term, they emphasize the inadequacy—if not the error—of the common translation of *azhdahā* as "dragon." With his man's body, writhing appendages, and horrific guise, Zahhāk presages the originating monstrous hybrid of modern weird fiction, H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu ("a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive… my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature…"[113]) The degree to which Ferdowsi dwells on the novelty of this monstrous form, itself excavated from ancient mythology, both recalls and inverts China Miéville's account of how weird monsters, epitomized by Cthulhu, possess "radical unremembered alterity" even as they are "always described as ancient."[114]

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[112] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 51-52.
[113] Howard Phillips Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu," *Weird Tales* 11, no. 2 (February 1928): 161.
[114] Miéville, "M. R. James," 113.

But whereas that elder entity's monstrosity lies in its unfathomable detachment from anthropocentric conceptions of the universe, Zahhāk's coheres in his deep carnal engagement with humanity.

> *Do pākizeh az khāneh-ye jammeshid / berun āvaridand larzān chu bid*
> *keh jamshid rā har do khwāhar bodand / sar-e bānovān rā chu afsar bodand*
> *ze pushideh-ruyān yeki shahrnāz / degar pāk-dāman be nām-e arnavāz*
> *be ivān-e zahhāk bordand-eshān / bedān azhdahā-fash sepordand-eshān*
> *beparvard-eshān az rah-e jādu-i / biyāmukht-eshān kazhzhi o bad-khu-i*

> (Two pure ones were brought from the house of Jamshid, trembling like willows
> For Jamshid had two sisters, like crowns for the best of women
> Of these veiled ones, one was Shahrnāz; the other, chaste and pure, was named Arnavāz
> They were carried off to Zahhāk's palace, and handed over to that draconic one
> He trained them in the ways of sorcery, taught them crookedness and evil.)[115]

Zahhāk's abduction of Shahrnavāz and Arnavāz has distinct sexual overtones; the sisters are corrupted, losing their secluded purity in the tyrant's clutches. The same themes are reiterated in another passage shortly afterwards: "*kojā nāmvar dokhtari khubruy / beh parde-ndarun pāk bi goft-o-guy / parastandeh kardi-sh dar pish-e khwish / nah rasm-e keyi bod nah āyin-e kish*"[116] ("wherever there was a noble, beautiful girl living in purdah, pure and silent / he made her his servant, right before him; that was no royal tradition, nor custom of the faith!") Zahhāk's appetites respect no law or precedent; he delights crassly in the exposing of the internal and cloistered (brains, noblewomen, his own eruptively phallic appendages.)

The connection between Zahhāk's monstrosity and his sexuality lies in the fear that his hybridity will not remain confined to his singular, anomalous body, but will instead spread chaotically to other bloodlines and generations. Franklin Lewis notes that it particularly seems to

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[115] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I,* 55.
[116] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I,* 57.

infect Shahrnāz, whose children Salm and Tur—though sired by the subsequent king, Fereydun—become kinslayers like their mother's erstwhile partner.[117] In this it resembles the epidemic monstrosity of the modern era, instantiated by Bram Stoker's *Dracula*[118] (1897) and reiterated by other vampires, werewolves, zombies, and aliens since. Whereas many of these horrors are ultimately contained, however, Zahhāk's *tokhm* (lit. "seed," lineage) does indeed spread before he himself is defeated. Ferdowsi makes the Zahhāki ancestry of the princess Rudābeh a key obstacle in her marriage to the Sistāni prince Zāl (himself the foster-child of a gryphon-like beast, the *simorgh*). Over many objections, the union is consummated, leading to the birth of Rostam—the central hero of the *Shāhnāmeh* and one of its leading slayers of *azhdahā*. That the poem's greatest champion is a descendant of its most iconic villain says much about how Ferdowsi crafts his multigenerational narrative. But it also speaks to his deployment of monstrosity, which implants itself in bloodlines like a genetic disease. Rostam, after all, is no perfect knight; in perhaps the most famous single episode of the poem, he kills his own son in combat.

All epidemics, fictional and real, are socially contingent phenomena.[119] The *azhdahā* thus emerges only after the reign of Jamshid, whom Ferdowsi makes responsible for virtually every key invention of civilization—not only textiles and armor, medicine and bricks, ships and perfume, but social classes and the concept of New Year's. At the moment when technology seems to have conquered the world, Zahhāk demonstrates corporeally the potential for unconquerable eruptions from within. The first (originally) human villain of the poem, he challenges societal hubris not only with his acts but through his mere existence following his

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[117] Lewis, "Shifting Allegiances," 406.
[118] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1897).
[119] Suffice here to point to the circumstances of this project's completion, in late March, 2020.

satanic corruption. Nor is it accidental that this existence is partially animal. In Gayomart's time, humans and wild creatures seem to exist in what Tim Ingold would describe as "interagentivity," a state in which "the constitutive quality of intimate relations with non-human and human components of the environment is one and the same." By Jamshid's age, however, the transition to "intersubjectivity" is complete, in which humans (and, to some extent, *div*) exist separately from nature as part of "culture"; "as minds which, excluded from a given reality, find themselves in the common predicament of having to make sense of it." For Ingold, a fundamental condition of this mode is "that personhood as a state of being is not open to nonhuman animal kinds… [W]e can countenance an inquiry into the animal nature of human beings whilst rejecting out of hand the possibility of an inquiry into the humanity of nonhuman animals...."[120] Zahhāk, and thereby the *azhdahā*, explode the intersubjective lie; and in dissolving it, perhaps, lies a key to the snakes' insatiable desire to consume human minds.

After a thousand-year reign, Zahhāk is at last overthrown and imprisoned within a mountain. But Zahhāk's defeat does not banish the *azhdahā* from the world. In fact, it is his conqueror Fereydun who next adopts its form, in order to test his three sons: "*biyāmad beh sān-e yeki azhdahā / k-az-u shir gofti nayābad rahā / khorushān o jushān beh jush andarun / hami az dahān-ash ātash āmad berun*"[121] (he came on in the form of a *azhdahā* / such as, you'd say, a lion couldn't flee / roaring and frothing with inner froth / while fire poured always from its mouth.) Here too, the creature is literally a modification of the human body, a shape that a man summons out of his own violent past to test his sons. Abbas Daneshvari concurs in linking Fereydun's manifestation to Zahhāk, noting that the former "is himself another hominid dragon

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[120] Tim Ingold, "Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment," in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 47-48.
[121] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 103.

for he, talismanically, metamorphosizes himself into a dragon to test the wisdom and courage of his three sons...”[122] Intriguingly, though, fatal combat still has yet to define interactions between humans and *azhdahā*. Zahhāk has been defeated but not killed; while one of Fereydun's sons flees the beast and the other charges it, the favored son Iraj accomplishes his father's challenge by holding his ground and commanding the creature to depart in the name of the king. The hybrid monstrosity that *azhdahā* represent does not yet demand eradication.

Sām's Beastly Rhetoric

Even when the epic's first description of a mortal battle with an *azhdahā* occurs, it does so via considerable rhetorical mediation, creating a moment of complex interplay between monstrous metaphors and reports of physical creatures. Learning of the potential marriage between Sām's son Zāl and Zahhāk's descendant, the princess Rudābeh, King Manuchehr dispatches Sām to kill Rudābeh's father Mehrāb and annihilate his kingdom: “*keh u mānad az tokhmeh-ye azhdahā… sar az tan jodā kon zamin rā beshuy / ze peyvand-e zahhāk o khwishān-e uy*” (for he is a remnant of the *azhdahā*'s seed… cut his head from his body, wipe the earth clean of any relatives of Zahhāk and his clan.”)[123] This genocidal campaign, Manuchehr thinks, will remove the temptation that the “*azhdahā*'s seed” presents to virtuous Iranians: the beguiling maiden Rudābeh is here conceptualized as a trick to enable the further spread of monstrosity. Explicitly equating *azhdahā* and Zahhāk, the king continues to conceive of the latter as an anomaly that can, through custodial violence, be definitively contained (within his mountain prison; within history; within etymological correspondence).

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[122] Daneshvari, *Serpents,* 24.
[123] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 226.

However, when Zāl hears of the approaching army, he adopts the image of the *azhdahā* for his own purposes. "*Hami goft agar azhdahā-ye dozham / biyāyad keh giti besuzad beh dam / cho kāvolestān rā bekhwāhad pasud / nokhostin sar-e man bebāyad dorud.*"[124] ("He kept saying: if a fierce *azhdahā* comes to burn the world with its breath / if it seeks to crush the land of Kabul, first it must chop off my head.") Zāl thus contests Manuchehr's definition of *azhdahā*. Monstrosity, the young hero insists, is located not within the genealogical past but within present political action. The *azhdahā* here is an amalgam of both patriarchal and royal authority, united in their quest for mastery over lands and generations. Interposing between the creature and its prey, Zāl imagines himself less as a champion than as a sacrifice—a brain, perhaps, to satiate this reiterated Zahhāk. (Addressing Sām shortly thereafter, Zāl drives home the comparison by suggesting that his father could cut him in two with a saw, just as Zahhāk did to Jamshid.)

In the end, such dramatic action isn't necessary. Zāl wins over his father, who offers to intercede with Manuchehr and secure permission for his son to marry Rudābeh. The letter Sām writes to this end is largely an account of his martial exploits in the king's service, almost entirely taken up with a description of his battle against the *azhdahā* of the Kashaf River.[125] As the first account of slaying such a creature in the Shāhnāmeh, it is worth examining in some depth. I have always fought *gardan-keshān* ("haughty ones, upstarts, rebels"), Sām writes, including:

> *Chonān azhdahā k-u ze rud-e kashaf / berun āmad o kard giti cho kaf*
> *Zamin shahr tā shahr pahnā-ye u / hamān kuh tā kuh bālā-ye u*
> *Jahān rā az u bud del por-harās / hami dāshtandi shab o ruz pās*
> *Havā pāk didam ze parrandegān / hamān ru-ye keshvar ze dorrandegān*
> *Ze taff-ash hami parr-e kargas besukht / zamin zir-e zahr-ash hami bar forukht*

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[124] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 227.
[125] Today, a river bearing this name forms part of the Iranian-Turkmenistani border. Ferdowsi's hometown of Tus lies along its banks.

Nahang-e dozham bar keshidi az āb / hamān az havā dar keshidi ‘oqāb
Zamin gasht bi-mardom o chār-pāy / jahāni mar u rā sepordand jāy[126]

(That *azhdahā* which came out of the Kashaf River and turned the world to froth
Wide as the earth from realm to realm, high as mountain upon mountain
It[127] filled everyone's heart with terror; everyone kept watch, night and day
I saw the air wiped clean of birds, the very face of the earth clear of predators
Vultures' feathers burned from its spittle, and the earth kept blazing from its poison
It would drag fierce leviathans up from the sea, even drag eagles down from the air
The earth became without people or livestock; the world ceded place to it.)

In these opening lines, Sām skillfully co-opts the *azhdahā* rhetoric of both his king and his son. The creature's world-spanning grasp and proclivity for depopulation recall Zahhāk; its unreasoning rage and use of flame echo Zāl's metaphor. Sām synthesizes these to define the *azhdahā* as that force from which nothing and no one is safe. It disregards boundaries, snatching prey at will from all biomes. Even other formidable beasts, such as the *nahang*, are not safe from it. This trope of the *azhdahā* as an apex predator will become common in later accounts of the creature. In its versatility, its predilection for invading inhospitable habitats (the sea, the air) and harvesting whatever it finds there, it recalls the macropredatory role of humans, and particularly aristocratic hunters.[128] Indeed, Sām suggests, it seeks to supplant humans, and bring about a new era in which they and their livestock are annihilated. He, however, will not let this happen:

Chu didam keh andar jahān kas nabud / keh bā u hami dast yārest sud
Beh zur-e jahāndār-e yazdān-e pāk / beyafgandam az del hameh tars o bāk
Miyān rā bebastam beh nām-e boland / neshastam bar ān pil-paykar samand
Beh zin andarun gorzeh-ye gāv-sar / beh bāzu kamān o be gardan separ
Beraftam be-sān-e nahang-e dozham / marā tiz-chang o vorā tiz-dam

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[126] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 232.
[127] The Persian pronoun is the ungendered third-person singular *u*. Some *azhdahā* are specified to be male (*narr-azhdahā*); others, like this one, possess long, feminine hair; others combine a range of gendered signifiers. Rather than trying to parse these, I've used "it" for all *azhdahā* pronouns, in part simply to provide better clarity during two- (or three-, or more) way fight scenes.
[128] Richard C Hoffmann describes aristocratic knights as self-consciously occupying the role of "top predators" (Richard C. Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 118.)

Marā kard pedrud har k-u shenid / keh bar azhdahā gorz khwāham keshid[129]

(When I saw there was no one in the world who could hope to tangle with it,
By the Worldkeeper's might, the pure God, I tossed all fear and terror from my heart.
I belted my waist in the name of the Most High, and mounted that elephant-bodied bay
The ox-head mace on my saddle, bow on my arm and shield round my neck.
I went on like a fierce leviathan, myself sharp-clawed and it with sharp breath.
Everyone who heard I would draw my mace upon the *azhdahā* bid me farewell.)

Sām presents himself as the singular hero who can handle this singular threat. In describing his preparations, he lists both spiritual and physical armaments. Yet he also emphasizes a metamorphic process by which the already hybrid *savār* ("knight"; man and horse as singular dominant weapons system) accumulates a menagerie of other traits: his mount becomes "elephant-bodied" (*pil-paykar*), his mace "ox-headed" (*gāv-sar*, recalling the famous weapon that Fereydun used to defeat Zahhāk), and he himself acts like a *nahang*, a semi-mythic aquatic predator. The paired epithets *tiz-chang* and *tiz-dam* ("sharp-claw" and "sharp-breath"), referring here to the hero and his horse, are regularly applied to *azhdahā* themselves. While other commentators have claimed that in defeating the hybrid monster, the hero becomes one himself, Sām suggests that this process in fact precedes the fatal encounter.

Residam-ash o didam cho kuhi boland / keshān mu-ye sar bar zamin chun kamand
Zabān-ash be-sān-e derakhti siyāh / zafar bāzkardeh fegandeh beh rāh
Chu do ābgir-ash por az khun do chashm / marā did o ghorrid o āmad beh khashm
Gomāni chonān budam ay shahryār / keh dārad marā ātesh andar kenār
Jahān pish-e chashm-am cho daryā nomud / beh abr-e seyah bar-shodeh tireh dud
Ze bāng-ash belarzid ru-ye zamin / ze zahr-ash jahān shod chu daryā-ye chin[130]

(I arrived and saw it like a high mountain, trailing its head-hair on the ground like lariats
Its tongue like a black tree, mouth open, flung upon the path
Like two blood-filled pools its two eyes; it saw me, roared, and came on in a rage
It seemed to me then, o King, that I was surrounded by fire
The world before my eyes appeared like a sea, dark smoke risen to the black clouds
The earth's surface shook from its shout; its poison made the world like the Chinese sea.)

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[129] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 232.
[130] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 232-233.

The description here operates almost entirely through metaphor. Precipitating from a set of landscape features (*kuhi*, a mountain; *derakhti*, a tree; *do ābgir*, two pools), the *azhdahā* is nonetheless denied any clear shape. Its vastness and the vapor-clouded atmosphere it creates both prevent comprehensive, taxonomizing views. The only features that do show through form a generic tableau of frightening qualities (gaping mouth, red eyes), with the notable exception of its long, trailing hair. "Head-hair," the text clarifies (*mu-ye sar*), insisting not only on the decidedly non-reptilian integument but also on the unsettlingly human (and specifically feminine) quality of long hair trailing down from the head. This feature becomes a recurrent (if not ubiquitous) attribute of the epic *azhdahā*, sometimes referred to as *gisu*—braids or locks, a fetishized emblem of female beauty. Unincorporated into a totalizing descriptive scheme, the creature's hair marks it as defiantly hybrid.

Bar u bar zadam bāng bar sān-e shir / chonān chun bovad kār mard-e delir
Yeki tir-e almās-paykān khadang / beh charkh andarun rāndam-ash bi darang
Cho shod dukhteh yek karān-e dahān-sh / bemānad ay shegefti beh beyrun zabān-sh
Ham andar zamān digari hamchonān / zadam bar dahān-ash bepichid azān
Sedigar zadam bar miyān-e zafar-sh / bar-āmad hami jush-e khun az jegar-sh
Cho tang andar-āvord bā man zamin / bar-āhekhtam in gāv-sar gorz-e kin
Beh niru-ye yazdān geyhān-khodāy / bar-angikhtam piltan rā ze jāy
Zadam bar sar-ash gorzeh-ye gāv-chehr / baru kuh bārid gofti sepehr
Shekastam sar-ash chun sar-e zandeh-pil / foru rikht z-u zahr chun āb-e nil
Beh zakhmi chonān shod keh digar nakhāst / ze maghz-ash zamin gasht bā kuh rāst
Kashaf-rud por khun o zardāb gasht / zamin jā-ye ārāmesh o khwāb gasht[131]

(I shouted at it like a lion, like a brave man would do
Without hesitation, I sped a diamond-headed poplar arrow into its collar
So that one side of its mouth was stitched shut, while its tongue—o wonder!—
        remained outside
In that same instant, I hit it with another upon the mouth, which made it twist
Then I hit the midst of its mouth with a third, and blood began boiling in its liver
It drew close to me across the ground; I drew that ox-headed mace of vengeance
By the strength of God, Lord of the World, I spurred my elephant-bodied one onward

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[131] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 233.

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I struck the ox-faced mace on its head; you'd say the sky had dropped a mountain upon it
I broke its head like the head of a raging elephant; poison poured from it like the Nile
It was so wounded, it did not rise again; its brains flooded the earth up to the mountains
The Kashaf River became full of blood and bile; the earth became a place of peace and
      rest.)

With his leonine shout, Sām continues his deployment of animalistic traits and behaviors. His tactics, though, are distinctly human: he weakens the creature at a distance with arrows, before delivering the finishing blow at close range. Sara Kuehn detects a practical aspect in the trope of aiming for the creature's face (specifically its mouth and eyes), since these orifices are presumably more vulnerable than the impenetrable skin.[132] This blow also prudently deprives the beast of one of its primary weapons, its fatal breath. Yet the uncanny anthropomorphism of the *azhdahā* opens the possibility of additional valences. The trope of stitching the monster's mouth shut with arrows (like so many others, inaugurated here by Sām) suggests a silencing. Given that the text's next *azhdahā* will prove fully capable of human speech (as Zahhāk was, both before and after his transformation), the stitching of the mouth reads as a pre-emptive effort to arrest the monster within its alterity, preventing any verbal gesture across the divide.

While the flood of bodily fluids serves again to emphasize the creature's vastness, it also serves as a mediation between the *azhdahā*'s desire to scour the earth and Sām's mission to destroy the monster. In dying, the beast's blood and venom reshape topography. The "peace and rest" (*ārāmesh o khwāb*) that descend following its death do so not upon a world freed from chaos but upon one in which drastic change has been validated; the verb *gasht* ("became, turned") is repeated three times in short succession, emphasizing the environmental reordering that has taken place.

Jahāni bar ān jang nazzāreh bud / keh ān azhdahā zesht patyāreh bud

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[132] Kuehn, *Dragon,* 97.

Marā sām-e yek-zakhm az ān khwāndand / jahān zarr o gowhar bar-afshāndand
K-az-u bāz-gashtam tan-e rowshan-am / berahneh bod az nāmvar jowshan-am
Foru rikht az bāreh bargostavān / va zin hast harchand rānam zabān
Bar ān bum tā sālyān bar nabud / joz az sukhteh khār o khāvar nabud[133]

("Many had come to witness that fight, for that *azhdahā* was an ugly monster[134]
After that, all called me 'Sām Single-wound'; they showered me with gold and gems
When I returned from it, my bright body was stripped of my famous hauberk
My steed's barding had slid off, and the saddle—whatever else I may say of this.
For years, there was no fruit in that region; nothing but burned thorns and brambles.")

This coda moves from celebrating all that Sām won in the fight—a fearsome epithet, abundant treasure—to a quieter meditation on the loss occasioned in the battle. Warrior, horse, and the land itself have been stripped bare. The violence that is inherent to the *azhdahā* (monster/hero) wreaks both a personal and an environmental toll. Yet Sām feels compelled to testify about this cost; indeed, to speak abundantly, eloquently, at length (*rānam zabān*).

The first scene of a warrior killing an *azhdahā* in the *Shāhnāmeh* thus establishes a huge number of tropes: the beast's destructive tendencies and predatory potential; the need for a champion to face it; the hero's answering the call and arming himself, during which he too becomes hybrid/monstrous; the journey to the battlefield, the exaggerated descriptions of the monster, including both natural and anthropomorphic imagery; the attack with arrows, aiming to stitch the mouth closed; a tangle at close range; the beast's gory death; the loss of the hero's armor; his great reward. Yet this formulaic structure is based not upon an encounter with a physical *azhdahā* but upon the thoroughly rhetorical report of one. The battle does not happen 'on-screen'—it is invoked by Sām to make a point, specifically reconciling his son's and his monarch's differing accounts of monstrosity. This is not necessarily to deny that the slaying occurs within the world of the *Shāhnāmeh*; only to point out that, as diegetic text, this account is

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[133] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, I*, 233-234.
[134] The word is *patyāreh*, which will be discussed in more detail in the section on the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān.*

filtered through a particular character's perspective, rather than delivered in straight authorial narration. Sām's letter seeks to achieve consensus around a particular vision of the hero's role in confronting evil, but he does so in order to establish peace, not in the name of spurring further violence. In this immediate aim, he succeeds: aided by his father's letter, Zāl gains permission to wed Rudābeh. But later heroes, in confronting *azhdahā*, will ignore both the alternate methods of confrontation modeled by Fereydun and Iraj, and Sām's own warnings on the devastation that follows even quick and righteous violence. In emulating Sām's battle, these future champions are following not their warrior instincts but rather a script, written for a particular dramatic purpose. The move from report to action entails a certain loss of ambiguity, replacing a textual account with bodies and blood. This shift locks the epic's characters into particular patterns of behavior from which they prove unable to escape.

At the same time, Ferdowsi never allows these patterns to become rote formulae. Each subsequent battle in the epic between a human hero and an *azhdahā* plays out differently, variations on a central theme that are highly sensitive to dramatic context. This multifaceted deployment of tropes in turn highlights the degree to which encounters with these monsters punctuate and successively reshape the world of the poem, moving it ever further from the dualistic stakes of its early cosmic battles.

Speaking Draconic

Only with the next appearance of an *azhdahā* is the supposedly archetypal scenario of mortal combat between champion and monster directly depicted within the poem's narration. This occurs as Zāl and Rudābeh's son, Rostam, rides to the otherworldly realm of Māzandarān in order to rescue the vainglorious King Kay Kāvus, held captive there by *div* after a failed

invasion. On his journey, the youthful hero undergoes a series of seven adventures (*Haft Khwān*, literally "seven banquet courses," though with a play on *khān*, "stages, stopping-points[135]"). After his wondrous horse Rakhsh defends the sleeping hero by killing a lion, and both endure a barren desert thanks to a ram which guides them to a spring, Rostam encounters his third trial after making camp in the wilderness.

> *Ze dasht andarāmad yeki azhdahā / k-az-u pil hargez nabudi rahā*
> *Bedān jāyegah budash ārāmgāh / nakardi ze bim-ash bar-u div rāh*
> *Cho āmad jahānjuy rā khofteh did / hamān rakhsh chun shir-e āshofteh did*
> *Por-andisheh shod tā cheh āmad padid / keh yārad bedin jāyegah āramid*
> *Nayārast kardan kas idar gozar / ze divān o pilān o shirān-e narr*
> *Hamān niz k-āmad nayābad rahā / ze dandān o az chang-e narr-azhdahā[136]*

> (From the plain, an *azhdahā* came on, whom no elephant could ever escape
> Its resting-place was in that spot; for fear of it, demons never went that way.
> When it came, it saw the war-seeker sleeping; but Rakhsh it saw like a frenzied lion
> It became anxious over what had appeared, who could be resting in that place
> For no one could pass by there, no demon or elephant or male lion;
> And those who did come found no escape from the teeth and claws of the male
> 　　*azhdahā*.)

Like Sām's *azhdahā,* this one is introduced by its ability to overcome other powerful wildlife and legendary creatures (elephants and *div*, in this case). But Ferdowsi plays an interesting trick here, shifting perspective into the nocturnal monster even as the human hero dreams. Through the beast's eyes, we see the warrior's campsite; if monsters are so often defined by the affective response they produce in human viewers, here we see a mirrored reaction. The *azhdahā* becomes *por-andisheh*, full of worry, at seeing another being so blatantly transgress the hierarchical order of its habitat. But *andisheh* also has the more basic meaning of "thought"; the

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[135] The interplay between these meanings is discussed in Olga M. Davidson, "Haft K̲ᵛān," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* XI/5 (2012): 516-519, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/haft-kan.
[136] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, II,* 26.

beast's mind is flooded by anxiety, but this has the effect of granting it interiority, making it "thoughtful." If the traces of humanity in Sām's *azhdahā* cohered around physical features, here they emerge at the level of narrative attention, provoking an unsettling complicity between audience and antagonist.

Sensing the threat, Rakhsh wakes his master, who stirs: *beh gerd-e biyābān yeki bengarid / shod ān azhdahā-ye dozham nāpadid*[137] ("He looked once around the desert; the fierce *azhdahā* disappeared.") This *azhdahā*'s coyness is also highly unusual; no other monster in the epic is so hesitant to engage in battle. Its unwillingness to attack is perhaps linked to its thoughtfulness. It seems to endure as long as it can outside the rules of the set-piece battle, as if knowing that once such an encounter begins, it cannot emerge alive. A cyclical game of hide-and-seek ensues, with Rostam chastening the horse for rousing him when he sees nothing in the dark; falling back asleep; the monster reappearing; and Rakhsh again alerting Rostam. The hero grows angry, even threatening to kill Rakhsh and set out for Māzandarān on foot. Here, Rakhsh too is granted considerable interiority: *del-ash z-ān shegefti beh do nim bud / ka-sh az rostam o azhdahā bim bud*[138] ("From that wonder, his heart lay in two pieces, for he was terrified of both Rostam and the *azhdahā*.") In addition to broadening the scene's interagentive perspective (note the animal's experience of *shegefti*, wonder), this moment highlights the equation of hero and monster. As sources of the horse's fear, both threaten violence. In fact, Rostam makes the first move towards carrying out his threat, before a heavenly light illuminates the approaching *azhdahā*. Seeing it, Rostam draws his sword and addresses it:

Bedān azhdahā goft: bar-guy nām / kazin pas nabini to giti beh kām
Nabāyad keh bi-nām bar dast-e man / ravān-at bar āyad ze tārik-tan

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[137] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, II*, 26.
[138] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, II*, 27.

Chonin goft dozhkhim-e narr-azhdahā / keh az chang-e man kas nayāyad rahā
Sad andar sad in dasht jā-ye man-ast / boland-āsemān-ash havā-ye man-ast
Nayārad beh sar-bar paridan 'oqāb / setāreh nabinad zamin-ash beh khwāb
Begoft in o pas goft: nām-e to chist? Keh zāyandeh rā bar to bāyad geri-st[139]

(To that *azhdahā* he said: Speak your name! For from now on, you won't see the world
    bent to your will
It can't be that nameless, at my hand, your soul will fly from your dark body.
Thus said the malignant male *azhdahā*: No one escapes from my claw!
This steppe is mine, one hundred percent;[140] the air in the heavens above it is mine.
No eagle dares think of flying overhead; the stars don't dare dream of looking at this
    earth.
It said this, then said: What's your name, that your mother will have to cry over you?)

As Mahmoud Omidsalar notes, this exchange closely mirrors the formulaic flyting that precedes battlefield duels throughout the poem.[141] But making one of the participants a nonhuman creature alters the terms of the confrontation. Name (*nām*; also with a sense of "fame, reputation") is a crucial quality for the epic's heroes; recall that one of Sām's rewards for his victory at the Kashaf River is a distinctive name. Names determine allegiance, map genealogy, and mark time—the names of Iran's fifty successive kings and queens serve as chapter rubrics for the *Shāhnāmeh*. By asking for his opponent's name, Rostam seeks to draw the *azhdahā* into the rituals of human combat.

But the monster refuses. It is not fighting on anyone's behalf, or seeking to gain a reputation; it is a territorial animal defending its turf. Inescapable, often invisible, it has no use for naming, as nothing escapes it to offer a report of its existence. Names, it reminds Rostam, are not merely human but fundamentally mortal; to name is to mark a being preemptively as the object of lament and memorial, doomed to death and so to remembrance.

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[139] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, II*, 28.
[140] With apologies for the anachronistic-seeming tone, this is exactly what the Persian says—*sad andar sad*, "a hundred within a hundred."
[141] Mahmoud Omidsalar, "Rostam's Seven Trials and the Logic of Epic Narrative in the Shāhnāma," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, no. 2 (2001): 269.

Rostam accepts this, prefiguring the moment, long after, when his shattered corpse will be lamented specifically as *azhdahā-ye delir*, "brave *azhdahā*."[142] Here, on the road to Māzandarān, he provides his full name, inserting himself into his lineage and so into history as both participatory sequence and commemorated past (…*man rostam-am / ze dastān o az sām o az niram-am*, "I am Rostam, I am from the line of Dastān [Zāl] and of Sām and of Niram [Narimān]"). Then he springs into the attack:

> *Bar āvikht bā u beh jang azhdahā / nayāmad beh farjām ham z-u rahā*
> *Cho zur o tan-e azhdahā did rakhsh / k-az-ān-sān bar āvikht bā tāj-bakhsh*
> *Bemālid gush andar āmad shegeft / bekand azhdahā rā be dandān do keft*
> *Bedorrid charm-ash bedānsān keh shir / baru khireh shod pahlavān-e delir*
> *Bezad tigh o andākht az tan sar-ash / foru rikht chun rud zahr az bar-ash*
> *Zamin shod beh zir-e tan-ash nāpadid / yeki cheshmeh-ye khun az-u bar damid*
> *Cho rostam bedān azhdahā-ye dozham / negah kard bar-zad yeki tiz-dam*
> *Beyābān hameh zir-e u did pāk / ravān khun o zahr az bar-e tireh-khāk*
> *Betarsid o z-ān dar shegefti bemānd / farāvān hami nām-e yazdān bekhwānd*[143]

> (The *azhdahā* swung into combat against him, but in the end found no escape from him
> When Rakhsh saw the *azhdahā*'s strength and body, that grappled so against the crown-giver
> He flattened his ears—he wondered at it—he gnawed the *azhdahā*'s two shoulders with his teeth
> He tore its hide like a lion, and the brave champion was astonished at him
> Drew his blade, and cut its head from its body; poison flowed out like a river from its chest
> The ground disappeared below its body; a spring of blood rushed from it
> When Rostam looked upon that fierce *azhdahā*, he let out a sharp sigh.
> He saw the desert all around him with blood and poison flowing over the dark dust
> He feared, and remained wonderstruck from that; continually he repeated God's name.)

Rakhsh's intervention resolves the horse's pull between fear of his master and fear of the *azhdahā*. Siding with the human hero, he assaults the monster's appendages, which invoke an atomized description with both anthropomorphic and animal qualities—ears (*gush*), shoulders

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[142] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, V*, 456.
[143] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, II*, 28-29.

(*keft*), and hide (*charm*; generally referring to animals, but sometimes applied to warriors' leathery skin). In doing so, Rakhsh becomes like a lion (*shir*), the same animal he defeated in the first of the seven adventures. This ferocity is marked as *shegeft*, a wonder or marvel; the same sensation that descends on Rostam at the end of the fight, as he watches the monster's bodily fluids wash over the plain. It is unclear why Rostam feels frightened in this moment (*betarsid*); perhaps he fears drowning in the flood of monster guts, but if so he makes no move to higher ground. His *tars* rather seems related to the three-way outpouring of savagery that has produced this gruesome scene. Having been asleep when Rakhsh killed the lion, he has not yet seen his mount exhibit such ferocity. To the same extent that the *azhdahā* demonstrated human qualities, Rostam and his horse have both acted animalistically. The space of their encounter has effectively dissolved taxonomy.

Mahmoud Omidsalar argues that this *azhdahā*'s capacity for speech and reasoning make it "resemble the speaking menagerie of fairy tales and dreams more closely than the less fantastic realm of epic." "Unlike other dragons of the *Shāhnāma*," he writes, "this one is endowed with magical powers…" Between this and its verbal capabilities, "The dragon in this respect is anthropomorphized."[144] I argue that virtually all of the poem's *azhdahā* possess a degree of humanity; as for magic, the ur-*azhdahā* Zahhāk is a renowned wizard, and several subsequent creatures seem to possess supernatural powers. Certainly, however, the *azhdahā* of the *Haft Khwān*'s dialogue marks it as a crucially liminal case in the epic's use of monsters to reconfigure the relationships between humans (particularly heroes and kings) and other beings.

Omidsalar's article as a whole seeks to conceptualize Rostam's seven trials as a psychological dream-journey during which he individuates from his father, the albino Zāl, whom

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[144] Omidsalar, "Seven Trials," 269.

he symbolically dispatches in the form of the White Demon. Whatever one's taste for such explicitly Freudian analysis, Omidsalar's study is valuable for redirecting attention away from postulated atavistic myths and towards a discussion of Ferdowsi's artistry in dramatizing his characters' interiority. On his journey to Māzandarān, Rostam briefly re-enters the interagentive mode of Gayomart's primordial era, through which this interiority is extended well beyond human subjectivities. That the location of this encounter is near Māzandarān, often referred to as *jādustān*, "realm of sorcery," certainly isn't accidental. Indeed, the talking *azhdahā* is represented in at least one twentieth-century oral version of the story as a sorcerer in disguise (*yek jādu beh shekl-e azhdahā*[145]).

Whether or not this is indeed Ferdowsi's implication, the association suggests a categorical slippage between magic and hybridity, in which both function as means of investigating nonhuman consciousness. In this sense, the *azhdahā* here represents a fantasy of access to animal understandings of being, a demonized double of Gwrhyr Interpreter of Languages from *Culhwch ac Olwen*.[146] That this interchange involves violence does not necessarily represent its failure. Draconic hostility may even be figured as an initiation into such expanded perspectives—as Sara Kuehn points out, a body of literary, practical-magic, and pharmacological evidence suggests a widespread premodern belief that eating dragon parts allowed the consumer to understand the language of all animals.[147] Here, however, it is the *azhdahā* that accesses language, expanding (however briefly) the sphere of participation in discourse. The attempt at totalizing communicative power comes not, as in *Culhwch*, from a

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[145] Abolqāsem Enjavi Shirāzi, *Mardom va Shāhnāmeh* (Tehrān: Enteshārāt-e Rādyu va Televizyun-e Melli-ye Irān, 1354 [1975/1976]), 80.
[146] See pages 77 and 82-83ff.
[147] Kuehn, *Dragon,* 128-129.

human diplomat, but from an embodiment of the weird. It destabilizes, rather than enlarges, the anthropic dominance that aspires to colonize time into history.

Goshtāsp's Slaying Service

After the fatal confrontation between hero and monster finally occurs, the *Shāhnāmeh* embarks on a period of teratological expansion and inventiveness. Warriors adventuring in distant lands assimilate varied wildlife to the category of the *azhdahā,* even as these foreign monsters demand distinct technological innovations. The pattern of encounter between humans and hybrid beasts thus continues to modulate alongside the poem's unfolding chronological narration.

A later prince of the Kayāniān, Goshtāsp, sojourns in Rum ("Rome," "Byzantium," "the West"), where he wins the hand of Qaysar's (Caesar's) daughter, Katāyun. Upset at her union with a foreigner, Qaysar demands that any suitors of his other daughters must accomplish a great feat of arms. Goshtāsp takes advantage of this challenge by setting up a racket whereby he fights monsters on behalf of wealthy, craven young Rumis; receives a handsome reward; and allows his employer to claim both the credit and the princess. The first of his jobs is a monstrous wolf (*gorg*; perhaps a *karg*, rhinoceros, as these two words look identical in most manuscripts and the beast is described as horned and tusked. Based on the rhymes in -*org*, however, Khaleghi-Motlagh settles on the former.) Qaysar describes it with an array of zoological terms: any would-be champion *yeki gorg binad beh kerdār-e nil / tan-e azhdahā dārad o zur-e pil / soru dārad o nishtar chun gorāz / nayārad shodan pil pish-ash farāz / bar ān bisheh bar nagzarad narreh-shir / nah pil o nah babr nah mard-e delir*[148] ("…will see a wolf rushing like the Nile; it has the body

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[148] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *V*, 25.

of an *azhdahā* and the strength of an elephant; / it has horns, and tusks like a boar; the elephant does not dare approach it. / The male lion does not pass by that grove, nor the elephant, nor the tiger, nor the brave man.")

Tan-e azhdahā, "an *azhdahā*'s body," inserts a hybrid term into the already chimeric descriptive catalogue, alongside images of both animals and geographical features. Perhaps this is the reason for Goshtāsp's comment on the creature: *hami azhdahā khwānam in rā nah gorg / to gorgi madān chun hayuni*[149] *sotorg*[150] ("I call it an *azhdahā*, not a wolf; you wouldn't think of a wolf as a raging behemoth!") He remains oddly insistent on this taxonomy, even while praying to God just before fighting the creature: *agar bar man in azhdahā-ye bozorg / keh khwānad vorā nākheradmand gorg / shavad pādshā chun pedar beshnavad / kharushān shavad z-ān sepas naghnavad* ("If this huge *azhdahā* lords it over me, which the ignorant call a wolf / when my father hears of it, he will begin wailing, and afterwards will find no rest.") The Iranian prince's refusal to refer to the animal as a wolf doesn't seem to be a matter of personal prestige; after all, he intends to take no credit for the kill. Rather, it reflects a particular desire to order the world with respect to hybrid monsters, wherever they might be found; both to mark them as the anomalies they are, and to subsume those anomalies under a particular label (*azhdahā*) with a particular history. Given the anthropomorphic qualities that the epic has already established are essential to the *azhdahā*, grouping this foreign wolf-creature under that term also invites consideration of ways in which its position recalls that of Goshtāsp himself, likewise a stranger asserting his violent presence in an unfamiliar country. Such a classification is also crucial to Goshtāsp's venture in Rum, which relies on asserting both the exceptional nature of the beasts he

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[149] This word, translated here as "behemoth," refers specifically to a large and/or ill-tempered camel; however, Dekhodā allows that it can also mean "*har jānevar-e bozorg*," "any big animal" (*Loghatnāmeh-ye Dekhodā*, s.v. "hayun").
[150] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, V*, 28.

kills and his own exceptional nature as the only champion capable of killing them. This dual construction is essential in order to justify the rewards he gleans from his exploits. Having identified the creature as an *azhdahā*, Goshtāsp is now able to destroy it:

> *Cho goshtāsp ān azhdahā rā bedid / kamān rā bemālid o andar keshid*
> *Cho bād az bar-ash tirbārān gereft / kamān rā cho abr-e bahārān gereft*
> *Dad az tir-e goshtāspi khasteh shod / deliri-sh bā dard peyvasteh shod*
> *Biyāsud o bar-khāst az jāy gorg / biyāmad besān-e hayvani sotorg*
> *Soru chun gavaznān beh pish andarun / tan az zakhm por dard o del por ze khun*
> *Cho nazdik-e asp andar āmad ze rāh / soruni bezad bar sorin-e seyāh*
> *Keh az khāyeh tā nāf-e u bar darid / jahānjuy tigh az miyān bar-keshid*
> *Peyādeh bezad bar miyān-e sar-ash / beh do nim shod posht o yāl o bar-ash*
> *Beyāmad beh pish-e khodāvand-e dad / khodāvand-e har dānesh o nik o bad*[151]

> (When Goshtāsp saw that *azhdahā*, he gripped his bow and drew it back
> Like a wind he took its chest with a rain of arrows; he took his bow like a spring cloud
> The beast was wounded by Goshtāsp's arrows; its bravery became linked to pain
> The wolf straightened up and rose from its place; it came on like a raging behemoth
> Its stag-like horns jutting forward, its wounded body full of pain and heart full of blood
> When it came near the horse on its way, it struck a horn into the black steed's rump
> And tore it open from testicles to navel; the world-seeker drew the blade from his belt
> On foot, struck it in the midst of its head, and its back and shoulders and chest fell in two
>   halves
> He went then before the Lord of Beasts, the lord of all knowledge and good and evil.)

As with Rostam's fight against the Māzandarāni monster, the brutality of this battle is expressed through creature-on-creature violence. The evisceration of Goshtāsp's steed (a far more disposable character than Rostam's Rakhsh) in excruciating anatomical detail prevents any romanticizing of the encounter; this is, after all, simply a job that Goshtāsp has been hired to carry out. Yet merely by asserting the *azhdahā*-nature of the animal, Goshtāsp insists on taking a particular heroic orientation to the act of slaughter. The invocation of God as Lord of Beasts (*khodāvand-e dad*), an unusual formulation that seems essentially unique to this passage of the

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[151] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, V*, 30-31.

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Shāhnāmeh, emphasizes the linkage of God's power to the exotic viciousness of his creatures, and the mediatory role of the human champion in regulating creation through violence. While this will be a central theme of the *Garshāspnāmeh*'s *azhdahā*-battles, its appearance here is in keeping with Goshtāsp's desire to comprehend his monster through classification.

Taking the animal's two tusks, the prince goes to find his Rumi friends. He takes the opportunity to chastise their country: *Bedu goft goshtāsp k-āy nik-rāy / beh rum andarun nist tars-e khodāy / bar-ānsān yeki azhdahā-ye delir / beh keshvar bemānand tā sāl-e dir / bar-āyad jahāni shavad z-u halāk / cheh qaysar mar u rā cheh yek mosht-e khāk* ("Goshtāsp said to him: O fair minded one, is there no fear of God in Rum? / In such a way, a bold *azhdahā* was allowed to live within the land until so late a year / It came about that the world was made a ruin by it; / as for Caesar, it considered him no more than a fistful of dust.") While certainly an example of the pro-Iranian chauvinism that surfaces throughout the epic, this comment also implies a complex relationship between divinity, kingship, monstrosity, and environment. When a kingdom does not fear God, wild creatures do not fear its ruler, positioned here as both chief worshiper and as defender of the populace (whether in person or by proxy—Sām, for instance, does not suggest that Manuchehr has failed in his kingly duties by outsourcing monster-slaying to his champion, while later, King Bahrām Gur receives no censure for seemingly spending most of his reign engaged in the chase.) The overlong survival of *azhdahā* thus becomes an indicator of impiety, suggesting a time and land out of joint. In its disregard for royal authority, furthermore, the monster recalls the rebels and upstarts (*gardan-keshān*) among which Sām included his *azhdahā*.

Goshtāsp leads his companions to examine the corpse, whose hybrid qualities are again reiterated: *bedidand gorgi beh bālā-ye pil / beh changāl-e shirān o hamrang-e nil*[152] ("They saw

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[152] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, V*, 32.

a wolf with the stature of an elephant, with a lion's claws and the color of Nile.") Though this closely matches Qaysar's description, the function of this catalog changes from warning about the beast to contemplation of its corpse. No longer a threat, it has become an object of wonder. Sara Kuehn notes that hybrids possessing the features of multiple creatures could be explicitly characterized as expressions of the marvels of God's creation, the *ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt*.[153] Dead, this *azhdahā* provokes the awed reverence that was lacking in Goshtāsp's account of its emergence.

Goshtāsp's next monster-hunting assignment is another *azhdahā*, though this receives no more specific physical description. It dwells on Mount Saqilā, and possesses typical predatory habits: *hami z-āsemān kargas andar-keshad / ze daryā nahang-e dozham bar keshad*[154] ("It always drags down vultures from the skies, draws up fierce leviathans from the sea.") To slay it, Goshtāsp demands a specially-made serrated dagger. After a fairly formulaic fight scene, the creature's body is dragged back to the palace, where "*bar ān azhdahā bar yeki jashn kard*"[155] ("a festival was made upon that *azhdahā*"). While it's unclear what precisely this means, the *azhdahā* here serves to link *razm o bazm* explicitly through the festive occasion occurring over it. It allows a seamless integration of these two aristocratic functions, in a way that a vanquished human opponent could not (at least, without significantly more ghoulishness). Here, too, the *azhdahā*'s suspension between different categories of adversary and heroic activities is key. And the custom dagger that Goshtāsp demands marks the beginning of a vogue for employing specialized inventions to defeat monsters, a trend which will alter the relationship between heroes and the hybrid beasts that challenge and resemble them.

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[153] Kuehn, *Dragon,* 76.
[154] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, V*, 41.
[155] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, V*, 46.

2. History's Chimeras: Later *Azhdahā* in the *Shāhnameh*

<u>Monster-Hunting Machinery</u>

While the link between the *azhdahā* and historical novelty in the *Shāhnāmeh* is established from its first appearance in the eruptive form of Zahhāk, only later do these beasts become explicit targets of technological experimentation. This ingenuity, furthermore, is sited in regions far from the Iranian heartland, marking links between imperial exploits, martial innovation, and the defeat of local monsters.

Seeking to rescue his sisters from Turānian captivity, Goshtāsp's son Esfandiyār sets out on a campaign which comes to comprise his own *haft khwān*. Many of these adventures mirror Rostam's earlier exploits in Māzandarān, and there is a strong sense that the younger hero is engaged in an explicit act of emulation—one which makes his eventual death at Rostam's hands all the more tragic. But whereas Rostam was aided only by his horse, Esfandiyār is backed by a full army, counselors, and logistical support. While the Māzandarāni *azhdahā* nearly took Rostam by surprise, the Turānian one is spotted by Esfandiyār's scouts. *Yeki azhdahā pish-at āyad dozham / keh māhi bar-ārad ze daryā beh dam / Hami ātash afruzad az kām-e uy / yeki kuh khārā-st andām-e uy* ("An *azhdahā* comes fiercely before you, which drags fish from the sea with its breath[156] / Fire flares constantly from its maw; its body is a mountain of flint") Though the prince announces that he will battle the beast—*ze shamshir-e tiz-am nayāyad rahā* ("it will not escape from my sharp sword")—he in fact has a carpenter build an elaborate contraption:

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[156] The Warner brothers astutely point out that there is some confusion whether the primary prey-snatching device of the *azhdahā* is its breath (*dam*) or its tail (also *dam*). Ferdowsi and his successors seem to have understood it to be the former, given that the *azhdahā*'s overzealous use of its *dam* sometimes leads to objects getting stuck in its throat; but the tradition that dragons catch things with their tails is an ancient one, perhaps linked to observations of hunting constrictors—taking the serpentine body as one long "tail." (Arthur George Warner and Edmond Warner, trans., *The Sháhnáma of Firdausí, Vol. V* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1910), 233.)

yeki naghz-gardun-e chubin besākht / beh gerd andar-ash tigh-hā dar nasākht / beh sar-bar yeki

gerd-sanduq-e naghz / beyārāst ān dorgar-e pāk-maghz[157] ("He built a fine wooden chariot

with blades set all around it; he left no opening / On top of it, that clear-minded carpenter set up

a round chest.") When the moment comes for combat, Esfandiyār sits in this vehicle and charges

forward:

Ze dur azhdahā bāng-e gardun shenid / kharāmidan-e asp-e jangi bedid
Ze jāy andar āmad cho kuhi seyāh / to gofti keh tārik shod charkh-e māh
Do chashm-ash cho do cheshmeh tābān ze khun / hami ātash āmad ze kām-ash berun
Zafar bāzkardeh cho kuhi seyāh / hami kard ghorrān bedu dar negāh
Cho esfandyār ān shegefti bedid / beh yazdān panāhid o dam dar keshid
Hami jost asp az gazand-ash rahā / beh dam dar keshid asp rā azhdahā
Foru bord aspān o gardun beham / beh sanduq dar gasht jangi dozham
Beh kām-ash cho tigh andar āmad bemānd / cho daryā-ye sabz az dahān bar feshānd
Nah beyrun tavānest kardan ze kām / cho shamshir bod tigh o kām-ash nayām
Ze gardun o az tigh-hā shod ghami / beh zur andar āvord lakhti kami
Bar āmad ze sanduq mard-e delir / yeki tiz-shamshir dar chang-e shir
Beh shamshir maghz-ash hami kard chāk / hami dud-e zahr-ash bar āmad ze khāk
Az ān dud borrandeh bi-hush gasht / beyoftād o bi-maghz o bi-tush gasht[158]

("From afar, the *azhdahā* heard the chariot's din; it saw the warhorses galloping
It came on like a black mountain; you'd say the moon's disc turned dark
Its two eyes like two springs bright with blood; fire constantly came from its maw
Mouth opened, like a black mountain it kept roaring at him as it stared
When Esfandiyār saw that wonder, he sought refuge in God and held his breath
The horses sought an escape from its bite, but the *azhdahā* sucked the horses in with its
        breath
It carried off the horses and the chariot together, while the fierce warrior was closed in
        the chest
When the blades entered its maw, they stuck; like the green ocean, blood spurted from its
        mouth
It couldn't get it out of its maw; the blades like a sword, its maw like a sheathe
Thanks to the chariot and the blades, it despaired; with exertion, it gulped it down a little
        further
The brave man came out of the chest, a sharp sword in the lion's claw
With the sword he cleft its brains; the smoke of its venom rose from the dust
From that acrid smoke he became unconscious; he fell and became brainless and
        powerless.")

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[157] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *V*, 231-232.
[158] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *V*, 233.

Esfandiyār's brother Pashutan revives the hero, who promptly washes himself and puts on new clothes; "*Hami goft k-in azhdahā rā keh kosht / magar ān keh bud-ash jahāndār posht*" ("He kept saying, Who could kill this *azhdahā*, except one who has the world-keeper at his back?")[159]

Norah M. Titley reads Esfandiyār's battle with the dragon as highlighting his weakness and inferiority vis-à-vis Rostam—he resorts to artifice rather than pure strength, and faints from the venom.[160] But if this was Ferdowsi's intent, later writers who were voracious readers of his foundational epic seem to have taken it quite differently. In many versions of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* and the related *Dāstān-e Patyāreh*, discussed below, the youthful Rostam himself deploys a very similar device, a bladed iron house, to very similar ends. Perhaps this is yet another dig at Esfandiyār—even when he seems innovative, he is still only copying the older hero. But Ferdowsi's language does not imply any censure. As he springs his attack, Esfandiyār is described as *mard-e delir*, "brave man," and *shir*, "lion." The prince's brainy use of a manufactured device distinguishes him from the raging animal. Yet he deploys technology not as a lever, accumulating power through distance from the raw proximity of animal encounter, but rather as a means to literally enter his opponent, to experience predation but survive. The text highlights the intimacy of the combatants. When Esfandiyār holds his breath, one line before the *azhdahā* sucks down the contraption, both actions are conveyed in exactly the same terms—*dam dar keshid*, "he/it drew in breath." This act of breathing, shared between monster and man, is then mirrored in the death of the former and the unconsciousness of the latter, both expressed as a loss of brains (Esfandiyār's blade *maghz-ash hami kard chāk*, "tore through its brains," before

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[159] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *V*, 234.
[160] Titley, *Dragons,* 22-23.

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the hero becomes *bi-maghz*, literally "brainless," himself). Via his spiked chariot, Esfandiyār achieves a radical closeness to the *azhdahā*, a sensual if not exactly erotic experience of shared bodily space and sensation. This intimacy emphasizes the metaphorical interdependence of the warrior and the *azhdahā*; none of the other predators to whom champions are regularly compared (lions, leopards, etc.) become so directly interpenetrated with the epic's heroes.

A much more distancing use of technical ingenuity appears in the account of an *azhdahā* slain by Eskandar, the *Shāhnāmeh*'s take on Alexandros III of Makedon (Alexander the Great). This character combines the heroic Alexander of the Pseudo-Callisthenian "Romance" with aspects of the Qur'ānic *Dhu-l Qarnayn* ("The Two-Horned One"[161]) and some traces of the villainous tyrant remembered by Zoroastrian clerical sources, which depicted Alexander's overthrow of the Achaemenid Empire as a cataclysmic event. The result is a complex figure, both Iranian and Rumi ("Western"), legendary and historical, a great conqueror and insatiable seeker after knowledge who nonetheless leaves Iran weak and divided after his death.

While campaigning in the land of the "Soft-Feet" (*Narm-Pāyān*, one of the epic world's "monstrous races") somewhere beyond Abyssinia (*Habash*), Eskandar finds his path blocked by a mountain. He inquires about a route around it, but is warned that: *yeki azhdahā-st z-ān ru-ye kuh / keh gorg āyad az ranj-e zahr-ash sotuh / Nayārad gozashtan bar u bar sepāh / hami dud-e zahr-ash bar āyad beh māh / Hami ātash afruzad az kām-e uy / do gisu bovad pil rā dām-e uy / Hameh shahr bā u nadārim tāv / khwaresh bāyad-ash har shabi panj gāv*[162]("there's an *azhdahā* on that side of the mountain, that destroys wolves with its excruciating venom / There's no way

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[161] The precise identification of *Dhu-l Qarnayn*, an adventurer and wall-builder who appears in Qur'ān 18:83-101, is a complicated and controversial issue, with Alexander as only one of the possible candidates. However, medieval authors seem to have largely conflated the two characters, particularly with regards to the building of a great wall to keep back the apocalyptic armies of Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj (Gog and Magog).
[162] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, VI, 82-3.

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for the army to get past it; the smoke of its venom keeps rising to the moon. / Fire always flares

from its maw; its two braids could make elephants its prey. / Our whole realm has no power

against it; we are forced to give it five cows as food every night.")

Two aspects of this description stand out. This monster's two elephant-snaring locks

(*gisu*) recall the trailing hair "like lariats" of Sām's *azhdahā*, but are identified with a distinctly

more anthropomorphic, and specifically feminine, term. Besides this *azhdahā* and the later *Shir-*

Kappi, the only possessors of *gisu* in Ferdowsi's poem are beautiful women—in the story of

Sohrāb, the warrior-woman Gordāfarid explicitly hides her *gisu* beneath her armor in order to

conceal her gender. The suggestion that they are used to catch elephants is baffling; such

behavior is never explicitly described in the *Shāhnāmeh* nor, to my knowledge, in other epics.

Perhaps we are meant to imagine tentacle-like appendages strong enough for pachyderm-

tackling. But the rhetorical association of *gisu* and *kamand* in the *Shāhnāmeh* and in other poetry

almost always refers to the beauty in question "ensnaring" the gaze of the male onlooker with

sheer erotic power. While the image of the siren-like *azhdahā* seducing an elephant is admittedly

bizarre, it arguably belongs to the semantic field that the poet has chosen here as well, if not

better, than the alternative.[163]

Secondly, this *azhdahā*'s choice of prey, and parasitic relationship to the locals,

differentiate it from those that have appeared before. Rather than snatching *nahang* from the seas

and eagles from the air, or waylaying other vicious animals that stray by its lair, this one is

content to take its nightly bovine tribute. This relationship has made its danger purely potential;

indeed, the townspeople do not explicitly ask Eskandar to kill it, but only warn that it will

impede his onward progress. The accommodation reached between the great predator and those

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[163] There is also a classical Persian poetic trope comparing the beloved's hair to black snakes, an image that in turn
suggests the erotic monstrosity of the Gorgon.

who live in its environs is a strange sort of domestication, recalling the ways that monstrous beasts could be dealt with before Sām's letter established the norm of slaughter.

Undaunted, Eskandar orders that the monster not be fed this night. When it next appears, he has his army attack it with arrows, but the beast only scorches them with its flames. Needing a new strategy, Eskandar orders his men to purchase the beast's usual five-cow meal, however: *beyāgand charm-ash beh zahr o beh naft / su-ye azhdahā ruy benhād o taft* ("They filled their hides with poison and naphtha / showed their faces to the *azhdahā* and fled.") Then:

> *Cho gāv az sar-e kuh bandākhtand / bar ān azhdahā del bepardākhtand*
> *Foru bord chun bād gāv azhdahā / chon āmad ze chang-e delirān rahā*
> *Cho az pust peyvand-ash āgandeh shod / bar andām zahr-ash parākandeh shod*
> *Hameh rudegāni-sh surākh kard / beh maghz o beh pey rāh gostākh kard*
> *Hami zad sar-ash rā bar ān kuh o sang / chonin tā bar-āmad zamān-ash derang*
> *Sepāhi bar u bar bebārid tir / bepāy āmad ān kuh nakhchir-gir*
> *Va z-ān jāyegah tiz bar-dāshtand / tan-e azhdahā khwār begozāshtand*[164]

> (When they threw the cows on top of the mountain, they readied their courage for that
>   *azhdahā*
> The *azhdahā* sucked in the cows like a wind, fast as one fleeing the claws of the brave
> When its sinews were stuffed with the skins, their poison spread through its limbs
> Perforated all its guts, made its way boldly through the brain and sinews
> It thrashed its head against the mountain and the stones, until a stillness settled over it
> The army rained arrows upon it, that quarry-stalking mountain lost its footing
> And from that sharp place, they lifted the *azhdahā*'s body, and left it overthrown.)

While this trick may not seem as explicitly technological as Esfandiyār's chariot, the use of poison and naphtha (*zahr* and *naft*) represent considerable scientific skill; naphtha particularly was something of medieval miracle substance, employed in contexts as varied as medicine, lighting, and naval warfare.[165] And while the chariot allows Esfandiyār to literally enter his

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[164] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, VI, 83-84.
[165] This method is paralleled in the deuterocanonical story of *Bel and the Dragon* (Daniel 14:23-28), in which Daniel's ability to conquer the dragon (*drákōn* in the Greek text, *tannīn* in the Aramaic) without a weapon—using a

monster, the stuffed cowskins allow Eskandar to slay his *azhdahā* without even touching it. In

doing so, he evades the gory intimacy that is a hallmark of the *Shāhnāmeh*'s poetics for these

encounters. There is an air of imperial privilege in his violation of local customs (which seemed

to encourage sating and coexisting with, rather than exterminating, the *azhdahā*), and in his

distanced exertion of power. In this sense, Eskandar's venture recalls David Quammen's

observations on the links between colonialism, monster-slaying, and detachment:

> [T]he extermination of alpha predators is fundamental to the colonial enterprise,
> wherever that enterprise occurs. It's a crucial part of the process whereby an invading
> people, with their alien forms of weaponry and organized power, their estrangement from
> both the homeland they've left and the place where they've fetched up, their detachment
> and ignorance and fear and (in compensation for those sources of anxiety) their sense of
> cultural superiority, seize hold of an already occupied landscape and presume to make it
> their own… The land itself, the ecosystem, must be defeated too—or so the invaders
> think… You haven't conquered a people, and their place, until you've exterminated their
> resident monsters.[166]

Mortal Signs

In using poison against a notoriously poisonous animal, Eskandar demonstrates his knack

for conquering through internal division. The self-dismembered *azhdahā* in this sense presages

the Iranian realm after Eskandar, torn into the petty princedoms of the *moluk-e tavā'ef*, the

"partisan kings." Lacking unity, Iran becomes functionally unnarratable during this period, with

Ferdowsi passing over centuries of empty time in a few dismissive lines.[167]

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concoction of pitch, fat, and hair—indicates his wisdom and favor with God. It is also worth noting that Plutarch
describes Alexander's wonder at encountering naphtha in Babylonia, though he does not record the conqueror
finding a military application for it (Plutarch, *Lives, Volume VII: Demosthenes and Cicero. Alexander and Caesar*,
trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library 99 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 329-333).
[166] David Quammen, *Monster of God: The Man-Eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind* (New York:
W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 253-254.
[167] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VI*, 138-139.

But Eskander's *azhdahā* has an even more immediate resonance. Right after the beast's

death, the conqueror encounters an enthroned corpse draped in treasure at the top of a mountain.

This strange omen terrifies his men; when Eskandar himself approaches to investigate, a

disembodied voice calls out: …*ay shahryār / basi bordi andar jahān ruzgār / basi takht-e*

shāhān bepardākhti / sar-at rā beh gardun bar-afrākhti / basi doshman o dust kardi tabāh / ze

giti konun bāz-gasht-ast rāh[168] ("…o emperor, many times in this world you've conquered fate /

Many thrones of kings you've seized; you've raised your head to the sky's dome / Many enemies

and friends you've annihilated; now from this world the path has turned back.") The *azhdahā*

will in fact be Eskandar's last violent conquest. From now on, he will be obsessed with avoiding

death, famously searching for and failing to find the waters of immortality. If in Zahhāk's era,

the *azhdahā* embodied a fear of sexual contagion, here it suggests infectious mortality, spreading

even to the most powerful; it is just past the corpse of the poisoned monster that Eskandar's road

"turns back." The epic as a whole makes the same inflection here, turning from the almost

infinitely expandable chronotope of legend (represented by Rostam's improbably capacious

lifespan) to the teleological determinism of history. In abrogating the *azhdahā*'s cyclical

predation, Eskandar has introduced an entropic forward momentum.

Failing in his efforts to avoid death, Eskandar returns to Babylon, where his demise is

presaged by the birth of a horribly deformed child. *Yeki kudak āmad zani rā beh shab / az-u*

mānd har kas keh did-ash 'ajab / sar-ash chun sar-e shir o bar pāy som / cho mardom bar o keft

o chun gāv dom / bemord ān shegefti ham āngah keh zād / sazad gar nagirad az ān zan

nezhād[169] ("A child came from a woman that night, and everyone who saw it remained in shock /

its head was like a lion's head, and there were hooves on its feet; human-like its chest and

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[168] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VI*, 84-85.
[169] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VI*, 118.

shoulders, with a tail like an ox. / That wonder died the moment it was born; it's fitting that no lineage sprang from that woman.") When astronomers tell Eskandar that this prodigy foretells his own downfall, since he was born under the sign of Leo, the conqueror immediately sickens and dies shortly thereafter. The deformed child is not referred to as an *azhdahā*—indeed, it seems more like a satyr—and fulfills a distinct plot function. Yet as a being combining human and animal traits, it recalls the manner in which the hybrid monster reconfigures time through its bodily presence. And its explicit identification as *ān shegefti*, "that marvel, that wonder," echoes the frequent usage of this term in *azhdahā* scenes. The appearance of the lion-headed child presages two deaths, its own (since its defiance of natural order must be an impermanent state) and Eskandar's. Here, particularly, it resembles the *azhdahā*, which almost never appears without dying but also—explicitly, as with Rostam's monster, or implicitly—entangles its heroic killer in perpetual violence that can only end with death.

When a Worm is not a Wyrm

Many accounts of the *Shāhnāmeh*'s draconic denizens include the *kerm-e Haftvād*, "Haftvād's Worm," the totemic creature that nearly thwarts the rise of Ardashir. But Ferdowsi never uses the word *azhdahā* in referring to this vermiform antagonist. This suggests the worm's participation in a different kind of monstrosity than the hybrid ferocity that defines Zahhāk and his successors. The tale of the *kerm-e Haftvād* is thus worth exploring against analyses that would flatten it into yet another example of an *azhdahā* (or, for that matter, of a "dragon.") At once stranger and more realistic than the epic's preceding monsters, the *kerm* lurks at a key chronological pivot.

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This story occurs at the start of the "historical" portion of the *Shāhnāmeh*—the chronicle of Iran's last pre-Islamic dynasty, the Sāsāniān. Ardashir, claiming distant descent from the Kayāniān, has overthrown the last Parthian king Ardavān, built a glorious city for his capital, and begun consolidating his power. But his rise is checked by the emergence of another upstart, Haftvād from the Persian Gulf region. Haftvād bases his power not on royal lineage but on his possession of a monstrous creature. This animal originates as a tiny maggot that his daughter adopts after finding it when she bites into an apple. Trusting in the *akhtar* (lit. "star"; fortune, auspicious power) of the worm, she is able to spin a prodigious quantity of cotton. This newfound prosperity extends to her family, her town, even seemingly to her era in its entirety—"*hameh z-akhtar-e kerm gofti sakhon / baru now shodi ruzgār-e kahon*"[170] ("Everyone spoke of the worm's auspiciousness; through it, ancient time became new.") In this explicit linkage of marvelous creature to temporal change, Ferdowsi highlights a key facet of his employment of the fantastic. Yet by rooting this wonder in a thoroughly mundane event—a larva wriggling in an apple—the poet asserts the transformative potential of the tiny and quotidian, in a squirmier enunciation of the butterfly effect.

For Laurie Pierce, Haftvād's daughter provides an example of how "the malevolence of the serpentine is mitigated only when it intersects with female characters." Pierce's analysis here is overly simplistic in insisting that "the *Shahnameh* never deviates from portraying serpents as evil,"[171] eliding not only the numerous descriptions of heroes as *azhdahā* but also the wondrous snake that bestows wisdom on Bozorjmehr, discussed below. But her argument draws attention to how Ferdowsi's use (and possible invention) of the character of Haftvād's daughter complicates the generic relationship between monstrosity and evil.

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[170] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VI*, 172.
[171] Pierce, "Serpents," 359.

As its bounty spreads, the worm itself begins to transform: *tan-āvar shod ān kerm o niru gereft / sar o posht-e u rang-e niku gereft*[172] ("That worm became bulky and gained strength; its head and back gained a fair color.") It outgrows the spindle-case in which it has been kept, moving first into a specially-made coffer and then into a *huz*, a "pool." In this spacious setting, it flourishes: *Bar-āmad bar-in kār bar panj sāl / cho pili shod ān kerm bā shākh o yāl / beyārāstand-ash dabir o vazir / gorenj-ash bodi khwardan o shahd o shir* ("Things went on thus for five years; that worm became like an elephant, with tusks and shoulders / they supplied it with a scribe and minister; it ate its rice with honey and milk."). Hybrid qualities surface in this description; besides the straightforward comparison to an elephant, there is a strong suggestion of humanity in the worm's employment of *dabir o vazir*, "scribe and minister." Exactly what these functionaries do for the worm is never specified; there is, perhaps, some purposeful ambiguity with regards to the creature's sentience. Its vegetarianism is also noteworthy. In a marked departure from the ravenously carnivorous *azhdahā*—and indeed from its counterpart in the Pahlavi *Kārnāmag-ī Ardaxshir*, which consumes blood[173]—the *kerm* contents itself with rice, honey, and milk. This diet represents a reversal of the meat-eating with which Zahhāk began his villainous career, perhaps even a return to the implied vegetarianism of the early Pishdādi era. Before its polity challenges Ardashir's righteous empire-building, the valence of the worm and the *ruzgār-e now*, the new era that it instantiates, remain indeterminate. Pre-draconic innocence may still be within reach.

In its combat strategy, the *kerm* also represents an attenuation from the furious violence of the *azhdahā*. Haftvād's rivals are overcome not by the worm itself but by accounts of it— *shekasteh shodi lashkari k-āmadi / cho āvāz-e in dāstān beshnadi* ("Any warband that came

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[172] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VI*, 172.
[173] *Kārnāmag,* Part No. 14.

became shattered when it heard rumor of this tale.")[174] The worm's power seems largely indirect,

relying on self-propagating narrative. Even Ardashir's forces are not immune. After Haftvād

destroys them in battle, he sends a message attached to an arrow—*chonin tiz-tir āmad az bām-e*

dez / keh az bakht-e kerm-ast ārām-e dez / gar andākhtimi so-ye ardashir / bar-u bar gozar yāfti

parr-e tir / nabāyad keh chun u yeki shahryār / konad past kerm andarin ruzgār ("this sharp

arrow comes from the fortress roof, for the fortress's peace is from the worm's fortune. If we had

aimed at Ardashir, the arrow's fletching would have gone through him. It shall not be that any

king like him will humble the worm in this era!")[175] Haftvād's invocation of *ruzgār* ("era, time"

but also "fate") once again places emphasis on the conception that he and his followers have of a

new epoch dawning. In this they mirror Ardashir, likewise attempting to shape a new historical

era through the force of his persona. But if Ardashir's project is based in appeals to the past—his

genealogical connection to the Kāyāniān—Haftvād's foregrounds instead the unprecedented, the

monster as rupture.

Fleeing defeat, Ardashir comes across two men who advise that he will only defeat the

worm through a *chāreh*, a trick or stratagem; after all, they explain, *hamān kerm k-az maghz-e*

āherman-ast / jahān-āfarinandeh rā doshman-ast / hami kerm khwāni beh charm andarun / yeki

div-e jangi-st rizandeh-khun[176] ("that worm from the mind of Ahreman is an enemy to the

World-Creator / you keep calling it a 'worm'; within its hide is a warlike, blood-spilling

demon.") Much as Goshtāsp reconceptualized his quarry from *gorg* into *azhdahā*, these two men

insist on a shift from *kerm* to *div*. Their terminology does indeed seem indebted to Zoroastrian

concepts of evil as both stemming from the demiurgic imagination and adhering to or inhabiting

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[174] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, VI,* 174-175.
[175] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, VI*, 179.
[176] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, VI*, 181.

(rather than manifesting as) material forms. Yet there is something imprecise in the equations drawn by their rhetoric. Describing the worm as an enemy to God hews more closely to Ardashir's political project than it does to any action the worm has taken; the specific accusation that it spills blood is directly contradicted by what the poem relates of its diet.[177]

Accepting the men's advice, Ardashir leads a small force into Haftvād's fortress, disguised as merchants. Asking for the honor of feeding the worm rice and milk, they get the beast's guardians drunk; then: *cho ān kerm rā bud gāh-e khwaresh / az arziz-e jushān bod-ash parvar-ash / zabān-ash bedidand hamrang-e senj / bar-ānsān keh az pish khwardi gorenj / foru rikht arziz mard-e javān / beh kandeh-ndarun kerm shod nātavān / tarāki bar āmad ze holqum-e uy / key larzān shod ān kandeh o bum-e uy*[178] ("when it was time to feed that worm, its meal was prepared from boiling lead; / they saw its tongue, the color of vermilion, ready as it used to be to eat rice / the brave young man poured the lead down; the worm became helpless in the hollow of its guts. / A crack came from its gullet, that made its hollow and homeland shake.") With its death, Haftvād's power is broken. He and his sons are executed, and Ardashir's path to the kingship lies clear.

Nowhere in the tale is the creature called or compared to an *azhdahā*. Some illustrators retained this taxonomic difference, portraying a punier or more sluglike beast; others depicted the *kerm* in the same manner as an *azhdahā* (that is, somewhat resembling the Chinese dragon, the *lóng*). But the text refuses to link these two types of slithering monster. Ferdowsi may simply be adhering closely to his sources, presumably a version or versions of the tale intermediate between his account and that in the Pahlavi *Kārnāmag-ī Ardaxshir-ī Pāpagān*. As mentioned in

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[177] Perhaps the allusion to blood is meant to suggest a specifically feminine form of ritual pollution, connected with the worm's maiden caretaker—though such a connection is far from explicit in Ferdowsi's text.
[178] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VI*, 186.

the Introduction, this text only ever calls the creature a *kirm*; it likely predates the adoption of *azhdahāk* as a generic term for reptilian monsters. There is a slim possibility that Ferdowsi's account allegorizes the rise and fall of late antique Iranian silk production,[179] though this smacks of euhemerism.

Crucially, however, the worm's behavior does not resemble that of the epic's multiform *azhdahā*. Curiously inactive, it dies not in battle, but in the course of its daily feeding routine. It is a vegetarian and a thoroughly domesticated urbanite, in contrast to the carnivorous *azhdahā* of the wilderness. Though the hybrid category of the *azhdahā* is remarkably capacious throughout the epic, it finds its limit case in Haftvād's worm. Ferdowsi's choice of terminology is better understood not as unthinking adherence to a Middle Persian source, but rather as a reflection of the attempt centered around the *kerm* to inaugurate a new era. On the brink of the Sāsāniān era, unprecedented temporalities proliferate. The worm's is characterized by (among other qualities) an altered relationship to the monstrous, one in which hybrid otherness is centralized rather than marginalized. In defeating the *kerm*, Ardashir instantiates an epochal shift on his own terms, one that avoids radical reconfigurations and will instead insist on the traditional: kings, champions, *azhdahā*. Yet the ultimate decline and fall of Ardashir's dynasty leaves hanging the question of what shape the alternate history, the refashioned *ruzgār* of the worm, might have taken.

Vanishing *Azhdahā*

One of the *Shāhnāmeh*'s primary overarching patterns is an attenuation of the supernatural, and the concomitant shift of conflict from dualistic battles between good and evil to murkier power struggles. This process accelerates in the Sāsāniān era; the *div* no longer appear to

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[179] Alireza Shapour Shahbazi, "Haftvād," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, IX/5 (2012): 534-536, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/haftvad-haftwad.

wreak havoc, while civil war, rebellion, and religious strife repeatedly rock the Iranian state. Yet the *azhdahā* remains a very real presence throughout this period, appearing four times in a range of unprecedented forms. The zoomorphic variety on display in the poem's final set of *azhdahā* assumes a certain poignancy in light of the poem's encroaching conclusion, the arrival of Islam that puts an end to Iran's legendary past—and, implicitly, renders its brimming population of both heroes and monsters obsolete or extinct.

This attention to fated time is particularly acute in the two *azhdahā* slain by Bahrām Gur ("Onager-Bahrām," after his passion for hunting these wild equids; historians generally refer to his early fifth-century CE historical counterpart as Bahram V.) Among the greater scions of the Sāsāniān, Bahrām is a lusty and active king, much given to adventures both venatory and venereal. The first of his monster-battles is by far the stranger encounter, both due to the beast's morphology and the aftermath of its death.

> *Beh nakhchir shod shahryār-e delir / yeki azhdahā did chun narreh-shir*
> *Beh bālā-ye u mu-ye zir-e sar-ash / do pestān be-sān-e zanān az bar-ash*
> *Kamān rā beh zeh kard o tir-e khadang / bezad bar bar-e azhdahā bi-derang*
> *Degar tir zad bar miyān-e sar-ash / foru rikht chun āb khun az bar-ash*
> *Forud āmad o khanjari bar keshid / sarāsar bar-e azhdahā bar darid*
> *Yeki mard-e bornā foru bordeh bud / beh khun o beh zahr andar afsordeh bud*
> *Bar ān mard besyār begrist zār / va z-ān zahr shod chashm-e bahrām tār*
> *Va z-ānjā beyāmad beh pardeh-sarāy / mey āvord o khubān-e barbat-sarāy*[180]

(The brave king went to the hunt; he saw an *azhdahā* like a male lion
On its upper part, hair hanging from its head; two breasts like women's on its chest
He strung his bow and loosed a poplar arrow against the *azhdahā*'s chest without delay
He shot another arrow into the middle of its head; blood poured from its chest like water
He dismounted and drew a dagger, and completely tore apart the *azhdahā*'s chest
It had swallowed a young man; he was clotted with blood and venom
He cried much over that man, lamenting, and from that venom Bahrām's eyes became

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[180] Khaleghi-Motlagh does not include this passage in his edition, though its presence in a number of early manuscripts and abundant illustrated tradition suggest that if it is an interpolation, it became so at a fairly early stage of the poem's transmission. The text used here is taken from ganjoor.net (https://ganjoor.net/ferdousi/shahname/bahgoor/sh19/).

blurred
And from there he went to his pavilion, called for wine and fair lute-players.)

With its long hair and breasts (*do pestān*), this *azhdahā* exaggerates the feminine qualities present in certain earlier specimens. Yet these are given an explicitly androgynous cast here, with the initial description of the beast as being like a *narreh-shir*, "a male lion." The *azhdahā*'s typical hybridity extends here to gendered ambiguity. Its chest (*bar*) thus becomes both a site of wonder and the target of much of Bahrām's violence; it is mentioned in four successive lines and, in two of these, paired with the homonymic preposition *bar*, "on, upon." But the king's attempt to destroy the anomaly that the creature represents only reveals an even more disturbing sight: the corpse of a young man, hideously coated with the *azhdahā*'s internal fluids. Overcome by sorrow, he returns to his encampment and surrounds himself with pleasure, particularly human beauty—*khubān-e barbat-sarāy*, "fair lute-players." This incident is never again referenced; the *azhdahā*'s strange physiognomy, its unfortunate victim, and Bahrām's reaction are left hanging, unexplained, in the epic's fabric. The king seems shaken by this encounter with mortality, particularly as the young man cut from the feminine body presents a horrifically distorted image of birth. Bahrām's attempt to immerse himself in sensuality afterwards stands in stark contrast to Eskandar's consuming obsession with portents of death; together, these comprise a pair of psycho-philosophical stances that echo throughout a great deal of Classical Persian lyric.

Bahrām encounters his second *azhdahā* when the Indian king Shangal, hoping to rid himself of his powerful Iranian guest, dispatches the king against local dangers. *Bedu goft shangal keh chandin balā-st / bar-in bum-e mā bar yeki azhdahā-st / beh khoshki o daryā hami*

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bogzarad / nahang-e dam-āhanj rā beshkarad[181] ("Shangal said to him: Such a calamity has come upon our country, thanks to an *azhdahā* / on dry land and sea it's always roaming; it hunts the lunging leviathan.") Bahrām attacks the monster, stitches its mouth shut with arrows, then decapitates it and brings the remains back to Shangal. It is almost as if this second *azhdahā*, whose arrival and death conform so closely to the pattern established in Sām's letter, is needed to banish the anomaly of the first. This exemplarity, though, does allow Bahrām to make explicit the linkage between the *azhdahā* and fate. Just as he prepares to fight it, his retinue try to dissuade him, referencing one of his earlier trials:

> *Bozorgān-e irān khorushān shodand / va z-ān azhdahā tiz-jushān shodand*
> *Beh bahrām goftand k-ay shahryār / to in rā chon ān karg-e pishin madār*
> *Bedin bad madeh shahr-e irān beh bād / makon doshman-at rā bedin bum shād*
> *Beh irāneyān goft bahrām-e gord / keh tan rā beh dādār bāyad sepord*
> *Marā gar zamāneh bedin azhdahā-st / beh mardi fozuni nagirad nah kāst*[182]
>
> (The nobles of Iran began clamoring, and that *azhdahā* put them into fierce turmoil
> They said to Bahrām: O king! Don't take this one to be like that rhinoceros earlier
> For this evil, don't give the realm of Iran to the winds; don't make your enemies in this
>   land glad
> Bahrām the hero said to the Iranians: One must commit one's body to the Just One
> If my fated time is with this *azhdahā*, my manliness won't make it more nor less.)

The Iranian nobles are right that Bahrām's enemies would rejoice at his confronting the beast; this has been Shangal's plan all along. But Bahrām refuses to address their political concerns. Any *azhdahā*, he suggests, could represent his *zamāneh*, his appointed time; such encounters are not up to individual courage (*mardi*; literally "manliness, the quality of being a man" and so, at times, suggesting its cognate "mortality") but rather to God's apportioning. Instead of confidence in his victory, the king expresses his surrender to divine will, potentially

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[181] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VI,* 576.
[182] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VI*, 577.

embodied in the monster's gullet. Unlike other champions who ask for heavenly aid in combat against evil, Bahrām allows the possibility that the *azhdahā* is itself a divine instrument.

The role of the *azhdahā* is even more dramatically nuanced in its only unambiguously positive appearance within the *Shāhnāmeh*. While not an instance of mortal combat, and so arguably outside the scope of this chapter, this encounter demonstrates Ferdowsi's complex employment of monstrosity in shaping his epic. Here, near the poem's end, the relationship between *azhdahā* and renowned humans tentatively extends beyond mutual bloodlust.

Kesrā Nushin-Ravān, a famously wise king and the last great monarch before the Sāsāniān descend into vice and infighting, has sent messengers to search for expert dream interpreters. One rider chances upon a school, where a bright pupil, Bozorjmehr, mentions his interest in dreams. Intrigued, the messenger escorts the boy back to court. En route, they stop to rest under a tree:

> *Bekhoft andar ān sāyeh buzorjmehr / yeki chādor andar-keshideh beh chehr*
> *Hanuz ān garānmāyeh bidār bud / keh bā u beh rāh-andarun yār bud*
> *Negah kard o piseh yeki mār did / keh ān chādor az khofteh andar-keshid*
> *Ze sar tā be pā-yash bebuyid sakht / shod az pish-e u su-ye barvar derakht*
> *Cho mār-e seyah bar sar-e dār shod / sar-e kudak az khwāb bidār shod*
> *Chon ān azhdahā shuresh-e u shenid / bar ān shākh-e bārik shod nāpadid.*
> *Ferestādeh andar shegefti bemānd / farāvān bar u nām-e yazdān bekhwānd*
> *Beh del goft k-in kudak-e hushmand / be jā-yi resad dar bozorgi boland*[183]

(Bozorjmehr slept within that shadow; he drew a sheet over his face
That worthy one was still awake, who was accompanying him on the way
He looked and saw a speckled snake, which drew that sheet away from the sleeper
From his head to his foot, it sniffed him intensely; went from him towards the fruit-laden
    tree
When the black snake reached the top of the tree, the child lifted his head from sleep
When that *azhdahā* sensed his agitation, it vanished from that slender branch
The messenger remained awe-struck; many times he invoked God's name upon him
In his heart, he said that this wise child will reach the heights of greatness.)

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[183] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh, VII,* 171-172.

The snake's bizarre interaction with the boy hangs suspended amid the tender, the predatory, and the erotic; uncovering his sleeping form, sniffing him "intensely" (*sakht*), and then vanishing as he awakes. Crucially, it is only after this moment that the snake (*mār*) is described as an *azhdahā*. Its participation in a moment of *shegefti*, "wonder, awe" shifts its taxonomic register from the zoological to the fantastic. The snake is identified as black, in an epic where that color connotes evil and violent intensity as well as beautiful hair and eyes; but it is also described as *piseh*, "speckled, mottled," as if mitigating the symbolic intensity of *seyāh*. Furthermore, the messenger interprets the moment in purely positive terms. For only the second time after Zahhāk's horrific transformation, the epic witnesses an act of becoming-monster. Through the child's encounter with the snake, both parties have been altered. Bozorjmehr becomes marked for greatness (*bozorgi*, a play on the first element in his name); the simple animal becomes hybridized, intermingled with the human, and so monstrous.

Bozorjmehr will become Kesrā's vizier, and their enlightened joint rule will represent the poem's last vision of a righteously-guided pre-Islamic Iran. By presaging this apex with an unprecedented encounter between a different kind of hero (the intellectual mastermind) and a different kind of *azhdahā*, Ferdowsi alters the terms of his narrative, foreshadowing the even more radical ontological break that the arrival of Islam at its conclusion will bring.

First, though, there is one final *azhdahā*. It is an unusual coda, an ambiguous monster killed by an ambiguous hero. In the failing days of the Sāsāniān, a great warrior named Bahrām Chubin betrays his king and makes a bid for the throne. While his name and prowess recall the champions of the past, Bahrām never quite seems cut out for kingship; his flaws exceed his

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greatness, and prevent him from capturing the royal glory (*farr*).[184] After a brief period of

success, he is defeated and seeks exile in China.

> *Chonān bod keh dar kuh-e chin ān zamān / dad o dām budi fozun az gomān*
> *Dadi bud mehtar ze aspi beh tan / beh sar bar do gisu seyāh chun rasan*
> *Beh tan zard o gush o dahān-ash seyāh / nadidi kas u rā magar garm-gāh*
> *Do chang-ash bekerdār-e chang-e hezabr / khorush-ash hami bar-gozashti az abr*
> *Hami sang rā dar keshidi beh dam / shodeh ruz az-u bar bozorgān dozham*[185]
> *Vorā shir kappi hami khwāndand / ze ranj-ash hameh bum dar māndand*
> *Savār o peyādeh keshidi beh dam / hamisheh del-e shādemān z-u beh gham*[186]

> (So it was at that time in the Chinese mountains, there were wild creatures beyond
>   imagining
> There was one beast, its body bigger than a horse, with two braids black like cords on its
>   head
> With a yellow body, black ears and mouth; no one saw it except in warm weather.
> It had two claws like a lion's claws; its roar always surpassed the clouds
> It would gulp down stones with its breath; thanks to it, times became horrible for the
>   nobility
> It was called the Lion-Ape; thanks to it, all the country was mired in suffering
> It gulped down riders and those on foot; always, it filled glad hearts with sorrow.)

The *Shir-Kappi*, "Lion-Ape," is not called an *azhdahā* in this introductory passage; only a

dad, a beast. Its viciousness and hybrid nature certainly suggest affinities with past *azhdahā*, as

do its two black braids and habit of sucking down its prey with its breath. Yet the narrator is

reluctant to identify it definitively. It is introduced as an example of a creature "*fozun az gomān*,"

"beyond imagining," one of the innumerable strange beasts inhabiting the Turānian wilderness.

The specific combination of lion and ape is a novelty within the poem (and, it seems, within

Persian or any culture)—indeed, the word *kappi*, "ape," does not appear elsewhere in the

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[184] Bahrām Chubin was a historical figure, though his meteoric career quickly assumed legendary guise (Alireza Shapour Shahbazi, "Bahrām VI Čōbīn," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* III/5 (2016): 514-522, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahram-06). In the *Shāhnāmeh*, his mysterious encounter with a sorceress, which sets him on the road to rebellion and death, provides one of the Persian reflexes for the narrative pattern discussed on page 1 (Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, VIII, 584-587).
[185] Khaleqi-Motlaq's main text reads *shodeh ruz az-u bar beh torkān dozham* (?); this clearer alternative is provided in the notes.
[186] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, VIII, 176.

Shāhnāmeh. Likewise, its seasonal appearance seems initially unmotivated. But its behavior is

the generic territorial terrorizing in which past monsters have engaged:

> *Yeki dokhtari dāsht khātun cho māh / agar māh dārad do zolf-e seyāh*
> *Do lab sorkh o bini cho tigh-e deram / do bijādeh khandān do narges-e dozham*
> *Bar ān dokht larzān bodi mām o bāb / agar tāfti bar sar-ash āftāb*
> *Chonān bod keh ruzi beyāmad beh dasht / hami gerd-e ān marghzārān begasht*
> *Jahāndār-e khāqān ze bahr-e shekār / beh dashti degar bud az in marghzār*
> *Hamān niz khātun beh kākh andarun / hami rāy zad bā yeki rahnemun*
> *Beshod dokhtar-ash tā bedān marghzār / abā dokhtarān o mey o meygosār*
> *Cho ān shir-e kappi ze kuh-ash bedid / forud āmad u rā beh dam dar-keshid*
> *Beh yekdam shod u az jahān dar nehān / sar āmad bar ān khub-chehreh jahān*[187]

> (The khatun had a daughter like the moon, if the moon had two black tresses.
> Two red lips and a nose like a knife-blade; two smiling gems, two fierce narcissi
> That girl's mom and dad were fearful even that the sun might shine on her head
> It so happened that one day she went to the plain, and strolled around that prairie
> The world-ruling khan was in a different plain from that prairie, in order to hunt
> And even the khatun was in the palace, trading opinions with a counselor.
> Her daughter went to that prairie, with her girlfriends and wine and wine-drinkers
> When that Lion-Ape saw her from its mountain, it descended and swallowed her in a
>   breath
> In one instant she vanished from this world; the world ended for that fair-faced one.)

Ferdowsi's attention to the monster's victim here is unique within his epic. The royal

daughter is presented with the standard descriptions of beauty that usually introduce a romantic

interest. The poet develops pathos through his account of her parents' devotion, and the festive

springtime atmosphere of her picnic. The girl's death then shatters the narrative surface; while

not particularly brutal, its suddenness and finality are emphasized through the repetition of *dam*

(meaning both "breath" and "instant"), and the rhyme of *nehān* ("hidden, vanished") and *jahān*

("[material] world"). There is also, however, an unsettling parallelism developed between the

princess and the beast that kills her. The *Shir-Kappi*'s *do gisu seyāh* ("two tresses, black…") are

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[187] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VIII,* 177.

mirrored in the girl's *do zolf-e seyāh* ("two black ringlets"). Her eyes are described as *dozham*, "fierce, wild," but also "depressed, downtrodden"—the same word used to describe the state of the country oppressed by the monster during its introduction, and repeated subsequently in two descriptions of the beast itself as *azhdahā-ye dozham*. Her going into the wild (to celebrate the coming of spring, her mother will later reveal) brings her together with her killer, who only appears in warm weather. In the moment of the princess's death, she is literally incorporated into the monster, which becomes—as she was—the sole object of her parents' concern.

Only now, in their deliberations, do the khan and khatun identify the creature as an *azhdahā*: *hami chāreh jostand az ān azhdahā / keh tā chin beyābad ze sakhti rahā*[188] ("They kept seeking a remedy for that *azhdahā*, that China might find escape from hardship.") The *chāreh*, "remedy, trick, solution," in question, ends up being the exiled Iranian warrior Bahrām Chubin. Seeking out Bahrām's retinue, the khatun addresses one of his servants, confident in her story's ability to inspire sympathy: *Bekhwāhad magar z-azhdahā kin-e man / bar-u beshnavad dard o nefrin-e man* ("He will seek my vengeance on that *azhdahā* when he hears of my pain and hatred.") This servant in turn promises his master's aid: *To az shir-e kappi nayābi neshān / magar koshteh o gorg pā-yash keshān* ("You will see no sign of the Lion-Ape, unless it is dead with wolves dragging its feet.") While *kin* ("violence," but also "revenge," especially when put into a genitive relationship) has previously been used to describe the conflict between monsters and heroes, it has never had the valence of personal grievance that it assumes in this episode.

The khan is angry at his wife for publicizing his inability to protect his daughter—*nangi shavad gowhar-am*, the khan says, "my family honor has been put to shame." But the khatun rejects his inaction—*agar nang bāshad vo-gar nām-e man / beguyam bar-āyad magar kām-e*

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[188] *Ferdowsi, Shāhnāmeh, VIII,* 177.

man[189] ("If it be my shame or if it be my honor, I will speak that my will might come about").

This discussion of honor involves terms that often relate to patriarchal control of female sexuality, *gowhar* and *nang*. This casts the entire story as a grotesque inversion of a courtship challenge—Bahrām must preserve the princess's familial honor not by marrying her but by retroactively avenging her on the beast into which she has vanished. The khatun corners Bahrām at a feast and relates the entire tale to him. This occasions a second narration of the girl's death, one which adds few details but reiterates both her parents' pain and the ineffable connection between the princess and the monster: *Beyāmad ze kuh azhdahā-ye dozham / keshid ān bahār-e ma rā u beh dam / Konun har bahāri bedān marghzār / chonān ham beyāyad ze bahr-e shekār* ("The fierce *azhdahā* came from the mountain, swallowed that spring of ours in an instant / Now each spring, that same one comes stalking through that prairie.") The khatun also emphasizes how it has destroyed all the young warriors who have tried to attack it: *Beghorrad beh dard-e del-e mard-e jang / mar u rā cheh shir o cheh pil o nahang / Kas andar nayārad shodan pish-e uy / cho girad shomār az kam o bish-e uy*[190] (It roars, to the grief of the warlike men; against it, what are lions, elephants, or leviathans? / No one dares to go against it, after sizing up its dimensions.") In contrast to Bayhaqi's Indian *azhdahā*, whose defeat is enshrined in its tallied length, this monster's raw measurements demonstrate its invincibility. Yet Bahrām gladly takes up the challenge:

> *Bedān shir-kappi cho nazdik shod / to gofti bar-u kuh tārik shod*
> *Meyān andar ān kuh-e khārā bebast / beh khām-e kamand az bar-e zin neshast*
> *Kamān rā bemālid o bar zeh nehād / ze yazdān-e niki-dehesh kard yād*
> *Cho bar azhdahā shodi muy tar / nabudi bar-u tir-e kas kār-gar*
> *Shod ān shir-e kappi beh chashmeh darun / beghaltid o bar-khāst o āmad berun*
> *Beghorrid o bar-zad bar-ān sang dast / hami ātash az kuh-e khārā bejast*
> *Kamān rā bemālid bahrām-e gord / beh tir az havā rowshnā-i bebord*

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[189] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, VIII, 178-179.
[190] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, VIII, 179-180.

Hami āmad ān azhdahā-ye dozham / keh bahrām rā pish khwānd beh dam
Khadangi beyandākht mard-e delir / tan-e shir-e kappi shod az jang sir
Degar tir bahrām zad bar sar-ash / foru rikht chun āb khun az bar-ash
Seyom tir o chārom bezad bar dahān-ash / keh bar-dukht bar ham dahān o zabān-ash
Hami did niruy o āhang-e uy / beh haftom bezad tir bar chang-e uy
Beh hashtom meyān-ash goshād az kamand / bejast az bar-e kuhsār-e boland
Bezad neyzeh-i bar meyān-e dadeh / keh shod sang-e khārā beh khun āzadeh
Vo z-ān pas beh shamshir yāzid mard / tan-e azhdahā rā beh do nim kard[191]

(When he drew near that Lion-Ape, you'd say the mountain grew dark over him
He girded his waist upon that flint mountain; with his long lariat he sat on the saddle
He clutched his bow and set its string; to grace-giving God he turned his thoughts
When the *azhdahā*'s hair became wet, no-one's arrow could affect it
That Lion-Ape entered a spring, splashed about and rose and came out
It roared and struck its hand against the stone; fire kept sparking from the flint mountain
Bahrām the hero clutched his bow; with arrows he blotted out the light of the sky
That fierce *azhdahā* kept on coming, that called Bahrām forward with its breath.
The brave man let loose a poplar-shaft; the Lion-Ape's body became done with battle
Bahrām struck its head with another arrow; blood flowed over its chest like water
He hit its mouth with a third arrow and a fourth, so that its mouth and tongue were sewn
        together
He kept looking at its strength and desire; with the seventh arrow he struck its claw
He loosed an eighth from his bow at its middle, and it fell from atop the high peak
He struck a lance into the beast's middle, so that the flint rock became greedy for blood
After that, the man stretched out his sword, and chopped the *azhdahā*'s body in two.)

Many aspects of this battle adhere to the typical tropes of *azhdahā*-slaying, including the mountain setting, the stitching of the mouth with arrows, the close-combat *coup de grace.* But as always, there are idiosyncrasies. The detail that the animal's hair becomes impenetrable when wet is both unexplained and, it seems, immediately contradicted by the action. Rather than breathing fire, as most *azhdahā* do, the *Shir-Kappi* produces flames in an eerily humanlike fashion, by striking the flint mountain with its hand (*dast*; the word can also mean "paw," but the anthropomorphic resonance seems warranted here.) There is also the arresting moment when the text notes that the onrushing monster *bahrām rā pish khwānd beh dam* ("called Bahrām forward with its breath.") The verb *khwāndan* is almost always associated with the human voice, rather

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[191] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *VIII*, 181-182.

than animal cries; in modern usage, it usually means "to read" or "to sing." If the sewing-together of the *azhdahā*'s mouth with arrows seems sometimes like an attempt to prevent these creatures from speaking, then the *Shir-Kappi* perhaps comes closest, after Rostam's Māzandarāni creature. Its arrested call to Bahrām is the last gesture made by an *azhdahā* within the *Shāhnāmeh*; whether a challenge or an invitation is left unclear. Its affective power, however—its *āhang*, intention or desire—is forceful enough that Bahrām seems to pause a moment to wonder at it.

Illustrators took a variety of approaches to this scene. While many assimilated the *shir-e kappi* into visual categories of either "lion" or "*azhdahā*," some took up the text's challenge directly, and depicted a bizarre hybrid animal.[192] The compound *Shir-Kappi* seems dangerously close to the *shir-mard*, the "lion-man"—a standard heroic epithet throughout the epic. It falls short insofar as apes fall short of full humanity. It also recalls the hybrid child that signals Eskandar's downfall, likewise a being poised between the leonine and hominid, existing to die, presaging destruction. Read as a scene of extinction, the death of the *Shir-Kappi* represents not only the vanishing of monsters but also of champions who define themselves through monster-slaying. Though Bahrām receives the hand in marriage of another of the khan's daughters as a reward, slaying this *azhdahā* is his last exploit. Shortly afterwards, he is assassinated by order of the Iranian king Khosrow Parviz, ending the heroic age. A few short and chaotic reigns later, Iran falls to the Arab armies of Sa'd ibn Waqqās, and the epic comes to a close.

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[192] Perhaps the most effectively disturbing is the creature depicted in the Saint Petersburg *Shāhnāmeh*, which possesses a slim, leonine body and a pale, speckled head resembling a human face stretched over an animal's muzzle, together with a pair of long, coiling braids and a strange structure—perhaps a lion's mane, crown, or cluster of horns—extending back from its scalp. In general, the miniatures of this 1333 manuscript are both highly idiosyncratic and exhibit unusually close fidelity to textual descriptions, rather than to formulaic imagery (А. Т. Адамова & Л. Т. Гюзальян. *МИНИАТЮРЫ РУКОПИСИ ПОЭМЫ «ШАХНАМЕ» 1333 ГОДА* (ЛЕНИНГРАД: ИСКУССТВО, 1985), 148.) The famous Tahmāsp *Shāhnāmeh* also deserves mention, for a valiant and reasonably successful attempt to actually depict a lion-ape hybrid; this can be viewed through the *Shahnama Project* database (http://shahnama.lib.cam.ac.uk/new/jnama/card/ceillustration:517959888).

Ferdowsi's deployment of the *azhdahā*, like his immense poem itself, defies easy summary. Some critics have attempted straightforward characterizations of the poet's monsters—Abbas Daneshvari, for instance, even while complicating the overall picture of the dragon in Islamic art, treats Ferdowsi's *azhdahā* as straightforward symbols of evil indebted to the pre-Islamic past.[193] But the absence of *azhdahā* from previous authoritative works on the past, such as al-Ṭabarī—indeed, the explicit denigration of legendary creatures by writers such as Bayhaqi—makes it clear that Ferdowsi's monsters were not atavistic remnants of ancient mythology that the poet was obligated to include in his epic. Rather, they represent a choice to narrate history in speculative terms. And unlike the *div*, which the poet links to eternal issues of human evil, the *azhdahā* is nowhere glossed.

Its periodic appearances—eleven, if we include Zahhāk but bracket Hushang's fiery serpent and the *kerm-e Haftvād*—bridge the immense span of Iranian legendary history. In regularly reintroducing these beings to his narrative, Ferdowsi consistently extracts drama from the way that monstrosity as a category refracts and shapes historical (and particularly socio-political) action. His *azhdahā* exhibits a constant interplay of tropological features and idiosyncratic elements, which shift in reflection of time's vicissitudes. Hybrid zoomorphic features, human (and specifically feminine) physical traits, speech, and ferocity all distinguish individual beasts; weaponry, technological mastery, relationship to the divine, and other factors differentiate the heroes who encounter them.

Emerging just as humanity claims rulership over the world, the *azhdahā* problematizes mastery. It questions human dominance over both the natural world and the human body itself; reframing the latter as animal flesh prone to pain, disfigurement, consumption, and annihilation.

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[193] Daneshvari, *Serpents,* 6.

Exemplifying overbearing control over its environment, the *azhdahā* nonetheless exists to be overcome. In confronting these creatures, their conquerors seek to reorder the challenge that the chimeric entity presents to hierarchies of being within time. And while they invariably succeed in slaying individual monsters, they remain enmeshed in a teleological scheme from which they are unable to fight free.

Like many great epics, the *Shāhnāmeh* is centrally concerned with humans' relationship with fate. Its heroes are those who make fate their own, who master it however briefly, even if they eventually fall victim to it. This force is often envisioned as a lurking celestial monster, an *azhdahā* or *nahang* waiting to lunge. Ferdowsi's speculative intervention could be said to lie in imagining a past in which this destiny is embodied in a dizzying array of bizarre and unsettling forms that remain intimately connected to humanity. Bequeathed a rich tapestry of monsters and a complex set of dramatic frameworks in which to embed them, the poet's successors kept returning to the *azhdahā* with a terrified fascination that is undeniably a form of desire.

Part II.

Adaptive Monstrosity: *Azhdahā* in "Secondary Epics"

Ferdowsi died, according to legend, tragically underappreciated yet just on the cusp of recognition; his long-overdue payment for the *Shāhnāmeh* borne through one gate of Tus, just as his funeral procession went out the other.[194] The story fit a popular and enduring view of the poet as a figure out of synch with his world, devoting his life to tales of the distant past, then dying before he could receive the recognition that was his due. But in the century following his death, the Iranian world was swept by a vogue for "ancient" texts—*daftar-e bāstān, nāmeh-ye bāstān, yādgār*—hungry for long-lost stories to be brought to light and rendered both accessible and beautiful through vernacular verse. The vast majority of these were almost certainly not genuinely antique in substance, but rather wove together names, places, and motifs that invoked the legendary past while satisfying contemporary taste. Popular as they were at the time, these "secondary epics" have generally not fared well in modern scholarship, preoccupied as it often is with a notion of the "genuine" that poets like Asadi-Tusi and Irānshāh do not uphold. As Kumiko Yamamoto writes in the introduction her *The Oral Background of Persian Epics,* regarding works such as the *Garšāspnāmeh*:

> As most scholars have agreed that they derive from or depend on the S[hāh]N[āmeh], there seemed to be no problem to solve. As a result, most of the later epics have not been published; few epics have been translated, and only half a dozen essays have been written. It is a regrettable situation, since later poets are often the best critics of the work which they take as a model. It is through the later epics that one can best appreciate the way in which the SNF was received by later generations of epic poets.[195]

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[194] Jalāl Khāleqi-Motlaq [Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh], "Ferdowsi, Abu'l Qāsem i. Life," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* IX/5 (2012): 514-523, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ferdowsi-i.
[195] Kumiko Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), xxiii.

Among the key elements of this reception, I argue, is the unique vision of monstrosity that Ferdowsi developed through his deployment of the *azhdahā*. Rather than adopting the euhemeristic attitudes that had governed earlier approaches like al-Ṭabarī's, the poets who fleshed out the "Iranian Epic Cycle"[196] embraced the hybrid beasts of Ferdowsi's epic even as they subjected them to further metamorphoses. In the *Garshāspnāmeh* of Asadi-Tusi, the figure of the *azhdahā* is split between the exotic animal that the hero overcomes and the formless fate that ultimately overcomes him; in the *Bahmannāmeh* of Irānshāh, these aspects reunite in a singular, devouring force. And as the various recensions of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* suggest, the *azhdahā* continued to provide fertile ground for poetic speculation well beyond the Middle Ages.

3. Living with Monsters in the *Garshāspnāmeh*

The *Garshāspnāmeh* of Abu Mansur 'Ali ebn-e Ahmad Asadi-Tusi, completed in 1066 CE, is the first surviving poem to directly capitalize on the success of the *Shāhnāmeh*. In fact, it provides the earliest textual evidence outside the *Shāhnāmeh* itself for the existence of that poem and its author.[197] The *Garshāspnāmeh*'s introduction explicitly situates the work as responding to popular demand for more legendary epics in the vein of Ferdowsi's masterpiece, while correcting the alleged omissions and inaccuracies of its predecessor. Particularly, Asadi-Tusi

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[196] This is the term adopted by, among others, "The Persian Epic Cycle Project," a research initiative headed by Gabrielle van den Berg at Leiden University, that aims "to recover, order, and assess Persian Epic Cycle material in order to provide the field of Iranian studies with the first comprehensive and balanced analysis of the form and contents of the epics within the Persian Epic Cycle" ("The Persian Epic Cycle Project," Universiteit Leiden, https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/humanities/the-persian-epic-cycle-project).

[197] Lewis, "World Literature," 318.

calls out Ferdowsi for failing to sing the exploits of the famed hero Garshāsp. This champion

appears as Kərəsāspa- in several of the Avestan *yasht*s (particularly 9 and 19), depicted as an

implacable monster-slayer. While Ferdowsi does not omit Garshāsp completely, he is a

peripheral figure in the *Shāhnāmeh*, and his exact connection to either the main royal genealogy

or to Rostam's family is obscured.[198]

Asadi-Tusi's solution is to present Garshāsp as the great-great-great-great grandson of

Jamshid as well as the great-uncle and adoptive grandfather of Sām, thus making him a link

between these two pivotal lineages. While he adopts both Ferdowsi's *motaqāreb* meter and much

of the earlier poet's epic diction, Asadi-Tusi operates within a much more focused chronological

scheme. After a prologue tracing the champion's descent from Jamshid, he makes the rest of his

epic a biography of Garshāsp from birth to death. Importantly for this chapter's purposes, the

hero's career is structured around three battles with *azhdahā*. While these combats perpetuate

many of the tropes established in the *Shāhnāmeh*, they revel in lavish description that obscures

the physically human qualities of Ferdowsi's creatures in favor of extravagant reptilian

monstrosity. Where the earlier poet's *azhdahā* were almost a mode into which different beings

could slip, those of the *Garshāspnāmeh* possess a more stable animal ontology—without,

however, entirely abandoning their status as "vectors of becoming." By tying his character's life-

arc so closely to the manifestations of these creatures, Asadi-Tusi makes the *azhdahā* a figure for

the hero's changing relationship to both personal and historical time, exemplified in his

ultimately doomed struggle against fate.

Modern assessments of the *Garshāspnāmeh* tend to be disparaging. Kumiko Yamamoto

characterizes it as a "formal," "static" text with "flat characters," foregrounding description and

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[198] Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Karsāsp," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, XV/6 (2012): 601-607,
http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/karsasp.

discursiveness at expense of action.[199] François de Blois notes drily that while it "is the best known of the many poetic imitations of Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma*… [n]o one, it seems, has ever considered it a serious rival." These critics note that Asadi-Tusi's verse style either closely follows that of his predecessor or falls short of it; it rarely if ever surpasses it. Alongside the epic action scenes, the poem has long expository passages describing the wonders that Garshāsp sees while traversing the world, and the in-depth philosophical discussions he holds with the wise men of India and Greece. Perhaps most glaring, especially in contrast with the *Shāhnāmeh,* is Asadi-Tusi's lack of interest in psychology. Despite spending the vast majority of the poem's 9,000 or so couplets with its central figure, we get little insight into Garshāsp's character. He is essentially unflawed: a great fighter, a pious and wise leader, a fearless adventurer into the unknown, and hence a fairly unexciting protagonist.

But these artistic shortcomings need not obscure the poem's accomplishments. An expansion of the *Shāhnāmeh*'s sprawling universe, it has a degree of "genre-saviness" that rewards familiarity with the older poem. As a fusion of the legendary epic with *'ajā'ib* and wisdom literature, it proved quite popular, surviving in a number of manuscripts including finely illustrated editions. Like its hero, it is fascinated by the exploration of wondrous phenomena and philosophical discourse. These two interests intertwine in its presentation of *azhdahā*. Its approach to these creatures, while more straightforward than Ferdowsi's shifting and nuanced portrayals, seems to have had a correspondingly more direct influence on popular perceptions of these monsters as reptilian "dragons." By consistently taming the *azhdahā* into a clearer (if more static) cultural image, Asadi-Tusi is able to sharpen his metaphorical use of the monster, particularly as a figure for time and fate.

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[199] Yamamoto, *Oral Background,* 137-142.

<u>A Fight of Passage</u>

The poem's introduction includes yet another comparison of the patron (Abu Dolaf, an otherwise unidentified king of Nakhchavān) to the *azhdahā*: "*kamand-ash cho az shast gardad rahā / to guyi keh bar dāsht abr azhdahā*"[200] ("When his lasso springs free from his thumb-ring, you'd say an *azhdahā* had carried off the clouds.") This is a somewhat more complex metaphor than the cognate passages in Rudaki and Ferdowsi; it relies to some extent on the audience's familiarity with the rhetorical trope of the warrior-ruler as *azhdahā*. By contrast, when Asadi-Tusi provides an introductory description of Garshāsp's prowess, he provides a catalogue of beasts that the hero overcomes—"*nah babr o nah gorg āmad az vey rahā / nah shir o nah div o nah narr-azhdahā*"[201] ("No lion and no wolf escaped from him; no lion nor demon nor male *azhdahā*"). This is very nearly a direct borrowing from the *Shāhnāmeh—nah div o nah shir o nah narr-azhdahā / ze shamshir-e tizam neyāyad rahā*[202] ("No demon nor lion nor male dragon can escape from my sharp sword!") says Rostam, heading out on his expedition against the Akvān-e Div. This interplay between quotation, variation, and extension defines Asadi-Tusi's poetics.

Most of Garshāsp's life passes under the reign of Zahhāk, and it is at this monarch's instigation that the young hero accomplishes his first martial feat by slaying an *azhdahā.* Besides noting that Zahhāk captures and executes Garshāsp's ancestor Jamshid, Asadi-Tusi does not dwell on the king's monstrous aspects. Partly, this may be due to his reliance on his audience's thorough familiarity with Ferdowsi's characterization of the tyrant. But it also speaks to a certain political acquiescence that characterizes the poem. Garshāsp accepts both Zahhāk's overlordship

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[200] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 17.
[201] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 20.
[202] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *III*, 290.

and, towards the end, Fereydun's—he is abroad during the struggle between the two, and takes no sides. Only at this late juncture, after Zahhāk's fall, is the deposed king identified as an *azhdahā*. This comes in a letter that Fereydun sends to Garshāsp, announcing his coup and asking for the loyalty of the Sistāni lords: "*Boridam pey-e tokhm-e azhdahā / jahān gasht az jādu-i-hā rahā*"[203] ("I cut out all traces of the *azhdahā*'s seed; the world became freed from sorceries.") Garshāsp accepts this demonization of his former sovereign without comment. The same phrase, *tokhm-e azhdahā*, is later applied to the King of Kābol[204]—the man whose lineage, Asadi-Tusi's readers undoubtedly knew, would ultimately unite with Garshāsp's to produce the hero Rostam. While Ferdowsi's vision is concerned with transhistorical questions of power and justice, Asadi-Tusi is interested in a far narrower depiction of one man's exemplary life. This includes not only fighting *azhdahā* but accepting one as king, even ignoring that king's monstrosity, up to and until the wheel of history turns.

As such, Zahhāk's commissioning of the young Garshāsp to kill an *azhdahā* is not treated as a draconic civil war but as a formulaic challenge taken up by the headstrong young champion. Garshāsp is fourteen years old when Zahhāk pays his father's court a royal visit. There, the king announces: "*Konun āmad-ast azhdahā-i padid / k-az ān azhdahā meh degar kas nadid / Az ān gah keh giti ze tufān bar ast / ze daryā dar āmad beh khoshki neshast / Gerefteh neshiman shakāvand-kuh / hami dārad az ranj giti sotuh / Meyān bast bāyad-ash bar tākht-ash / v-az-ān zesht patyāreh kin ākht-ash*" ("Now an *azhdahā* has appeared, and no one has seen anything greater than that *azhdahā* / From that place where storms ravage the earth, it came up from the sea to rest on dry land / It took its lair on Mount Shekāvand; the earth is being made miserable through suffering / Someone must gird up and gallop after it, and exact vengeance from that ugly

[203] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 330.
[204] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 430.

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monster.") Zahhāk's emphasis on the unprecedented nature of the beast, and its jarring change of

habitat, seem to echo his own qualities: the Satanically-crafted monster invading *Irānzamin* from

abroad. But neither Garshāsp nor the narrator comment on these ironies. Rather: *Chonin goft*

garshāsp k-az farr-e shāh / bebandam bar ahriman-e tireh-rāh / Marā chun beh kaf gorz o

shabrang zir / beh pish-am cheh narr-azhdahā o cheh shir / Konam z-azhdahā-ye falak sar ze kin

/ cheh bāk āyadam ze azhdahā-ye zamin / Sar-e azhdahā basteh dām gir / to andisheh-ye u

mabar jām gir[205]("Thus said Garshāsp: By the King's glory, I will gird myself against this

Ahriman of the dark path / With mace in my fist, on my night-colored steed, any male *azhdahā*

or lion before me, / I'll submit my head to the vengeance of the celestial *azhdahā,* should I run in

fear from the earthly *azhdahā* / The *azhdahā*'s head will be caught in a trap. Don't worry about

it; take up the wine-cup!")

Identifying the beast as an *ahriman*, Garshāsp follows Zahhāk's lead in marking it as a

site of abjection (*ān zesht patyāreh*, "that ugly monster.") Yet his contrast between the *azhdahā-*

ye falak and the *azhdahā-ye zamin*—the constellation Draco, a celestial entity lurking at the

ecliptic nodes,[206] and the "earthly *azhdahā*," the physical monster ravaging the countryside—

establishes a central dynamic of the epic. Although the *azhdahā-ye falak* cannot be defeated, or

even fought, in confronting the *azhdahā-ye zamin* the hero strikes a blow against astral tyranny.

By contrast, fearing worldly beasts puts humans at the mercy of cosmic forces. In subsequent

episodes, Asadi-Tusi elaborates this philosophical stance by positioning the "earthly *azhdahā*" as

an emblem of God's power and limitless divine inventiveness. Running from the monster is not

only expressing fear but rejecting the multiform wonders and horrors of creation; battling it

aligns the hero with God against the vicissitudes of fate.

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[205] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 52.
[206] Kuehn, *Dragon,* 136-139.

Garshāsp's father Esret, however, does not approve of his son's headstrong volunteering. He asks why the boy accepted such a mission:

Nah har jāyegah rāst goftan sazā-st / farāvān dorugh-ast k-ān beh ze rāst
Negar jang-e in azhdahā sar-sari / chonān jang-hā-ye degar nashmari
Nah gur-ast k-oftad beh zakhm-e dorosht / nah shiri keh shāyad beh shamshir kosht
Nah divi keh āyad beh khamm-e kamand / nah gordi ke-sh az zin tavāni fekand
Damān azhdahā-i-st k-az jang-e u / sotoh shod jahān pāk bar chang-e u
Zadand-ash basi tir muyi nadukht / tan-ash ham ze naft o ze ātash nasukht
Mashow ghorreh z-in mardi o zur-e tan / beh man bar bebakhshāy o bar khwishtan
Beh khwān bar nayāyad hami mihmān / k-ash az ārzu dar del āyad gomān
Beh giti kasi mard-e in jang nist / agar to neyāzi bedin nang nist
Fakandan beh mardi tan andar halāk / nah mardi-st k-az bādsāri-st pāk[207]

(It's not always right to say 'indeed!'; it's a great lie, to think that's better than what's
        right!
Consider this *azhdahā* battle end-to-end, don't count it like other battles
This isn't some onager that will collapse at one wound, nor a lion that can be killed with
        a sword
It's not a demon that can be caught in a lasso's loop, nor a hero you can toss from the
        saddle
It's a hissing *azhdahā*, and through battling it, the world became ruined by its claws
People struck it with many arrows, they didn't stitch a single hair; fire and naptha don't
        burn it
Don't let chivalry and bodily strength make you cavalier; spare me, and spare yourself!
One needn't always answer a guest's summons, if one's heart doubts the request.
There's no one on earth who's man enough for this battle; if you're not up to it, that's no
        shame!
Courageously throwing your body into destruction isn't courage, but downright
        vainglory.)

Esret's concerns, it turns out, will be ill-founded; the weapons he claims will be useless against the *azhdahā* prove perfectly sufficient to overcome it, at least when coupled with a prayer. But whether he is underestimating his son or overestimating the earthly *azhdahā*, his language will echo much later in the poem with regards to the celestial *azhdahā*. By obeying the king's summons, Esret suggests, his son is committing himself to an ultimately unwinnable

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[207] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 52.

battle. He is wrong only microcosmically. For all the great triumphs that Garshāsp will accomplish, his entry into heroic narrative sets him on the path towards a life of constant warfare, from which he will only be freed by death. The young man's response seems to recognize the implications of his decision: *Bedu goft garshāsp m-andish hich / to az bahr-e shah bazm o rāmesh besich / Shomā rā mey o shādi o bamm o zir / man o azhdahā o koh o gorz o tir*[208] ("Garshāsp said to him: Don't worry at all; prepare yourself for feasting and pleasure on the king's behalf / For you all, wine and happiness and bass strings and treble; for me, *azhdahā* and mountain and mace and arrow.") The two contrasting lists subordinate *bazm* to *razm*, defining the royal feast as a luxury available to some only through martial exertion and self-sacrifice of others.

Just outside the *azhdahā*'s valley, Garshāsp encounters a watchman, stationed there to warn away any who stray too close to the beast.[209] This watchman implores him not to continue, emphasizing the creature's immensity and invulnerability to weapons, but the young hero ignores him. There will be no real pay-off to Garshāsp's repeated flouting of his elders' dire pronouncements. They will be proven wrong; his exceptional warrior-ability will trump their understanding of what can and can't be done.

> *Ze taryāk lakhti ze bim-e gazand / bekhward o gereh kard bar zin kamand*
> *Mar ān vizhegān rā hamānjā bemānd / beh yazdān panāhid o bāreh berānd*
> *Dar āmad bedān darreh ān nāmdār / yeki kuh-e jonbān bedid āshkār*
> *Bar ān poshteh bar posht sāyān beh kin / ze pichidan-ash jonbesh andar zamin*
> *Cho tārik ghāri dahan pahn o bāz / do yashk-ash cho shākh-e gavaznān derāz*
> *Zabān o nafas dud o ātash beh ham / dahān kureh-ye ātash o sineh dam*
> *Beh dud o nafas dar do chashm-ash ze nur / derafshān cho dar shab setāreh ze dur*

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[208] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 53.
[209] The section heading for this episode is "*tarsānidan-e garshāsp az jādu-i*," "Garshāsp is frightened by sorcery/a sorcerer." As the poem stands, this is an odd title; there is no direct reference to sorcery in the edited text, and Garshāsp does not evince any particular fear. Perhaps it simply refers to the hero hearing a frightening description of the monster he is about to face, though this would represent an unusually broad meaning for *jādu-i* (into something like "uncanniness, the supernatural"?); alternately, other versions may have made the craven watchman a more direct threat, perhaps even a *jādu* explicitly out to hinder the hero's quest.

Ze taff-e dahān-ash del khāreh mum / ze zahr-e dam-ash bād-e giti samum
Gereh dar gereh khamm-e dom tā beh posht / hameh sar-sh chun khār mu-ye dorosht
Pashizeh pashizeh tan az rang-e nil / az-u har pashizi meh az gush-e pil
Gahi chun separ-hā fakandi-sh bāz / gahi hamchu jowshan keshidi ferāz
To gofti keh bod jangi-i dar kamin / tan-ash sar beh sar ālat-e jang o kin
Hameh kām tigh o hameh dam kamar / hameh sar senān o hameh tan separ
Cho bar kuh sudi tan-e sang-rang / beh farsang rafti chakākāk-e sang[210]

(He ate a little opium, cautious of the bite,[211] then tied the lasso to his saddle.
He left the chosen ones in that place, sought refuge in God and spurred his steed
The famed one entered that ravine; he saw a moving mountain clearly
On the back of that heap grinding with vengence, from its twisting a tremor in the earth,
Like a black cave its mouth, wide and open; its two tusks like the long antlers of a stag
Tongue and breath, smoke and fire mixed; mouth a fiery furnace, and chest the bellows
With smoke and breath, the light of its two eyes glowing like distant stars
From the spittle of its mouth, the flint heart became wax; from the poison of its breath,
    the world's wind became the simoom
Knot on knot, the coils of its tail up to its back; all the hair on its head stuck up like
    thorns
Scales on scales, its Nile-colored body, each scale bigger than an elephant ear
Sometimes like shields it threw them open; sometimes like armor, it drew them shut
You'd say it was a warlike one in ambush, its body head-to-toe weapons of war and
    vengeance
Its maw all blade and its tail all girdle, its head all lances and its body all shields
When it dragged its stone-colored body along the mountain, the clattering of stones
    echoed for a parasang.)

Asadi-Tusi's physical description of the *azhdahā* here exceeds in detail anything in the

Shāhnāmeh, while still building upon the tropes present in the earlier epic. He borrows the

comparison of the mouth to a cave, the horned head, and the smoky breath. But his references to

a coiling tail (*kham-e dom*) and scales (*pashizeh*) make this an explicitly reptilian monster;

perhaps, given the account of it dragging its body along the mountain (*bar kuh sudi tan*), a

specifically serpentine one (Esret's brief reference to *mu*, hair, is not elaborated). More than any

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[210] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 58.
[211] Opium (*taryāk*; more properly "theriac," a compounded drug containing a variety of ingredients, often including opium and viper flesh) was widely considered an effective antidote against snake venom (Daneshvari, *Serpents*, 191; Kuehn, *Dragon,* 170-174).

of Ferdowsi's monsters, this inaugural beast of the *Garshāspnāmeh* conforms to classic "dragon" typology. Yet within this generic description, the poet still finds room for innovation. The comparison of the creature's eyes to distant stars in the night sky (*do chashm-ash … / derafshān cho dar shab setāreh ze dur*) links this earthly *azhdahā* to its celestial counterpart; its ability to influence both human emotion and the weather itself likewise recalls astrological power. By contrast, the cluster of martial metaphors at the end of the passage emphasize how much of the creature's strangeness derives from its emulation of human combat technology. By fighting it, the fourteen-year-old hero goes to war, both in the worldly sense of committing himself to a life of violence, and, on a cosmic scale, enmeshing himself in a struggle against fate.

Astonished by the monster, Garshāsp implores God for aid. The prayer is significantly longer than that uttered by any of the *Shāhnāmeh*'s *azhdahā* fighters, and refers specifically to divine power over natural processes. *Koni zendeh har-guneh-gun mordeh rā / dehi tāzegi khāk-e pazhmordeh rā / negāri tan-e jānevar sad-hezār / k-az-ishān do hamsān nadārad negār / ze daryā bedin-guneh kuh āvari / jahāni ze ranj-ash sotuh āvari*[212] ("You make living all the various dead; you give freshness to the barren soil / you look after the bodies of a hundred thousand creatures, no two of which are copies of one another / In such a way, you bring mountains from the sea, and deliver the earth from its suffering.") Garshāsp's deity is linked here to the regenerative power of the earth, to the diversity of its life-forms, and to geological change. In addition to suggesting the immense spatiotemporal ambit of divine power, the account of mountains brought from the sea recalls the *azhdahā* itself, which rises from the sea (*daryā*) and is first described as *yeki kuh-e jonbān*, "a moving mountain." Garshāsp seeks the power of a divinity that is not the *azhdahā*'s enemy but rather its creator and master.

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[212] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 58-59.

His reframing does not comfort his horse, which proves much less valiant than Rakhsh:

Samand-ash cho ān zesht patyāreh did / shamid o harāsid o andar ramid ("When his bay saw that ugly monster, it lost its wits, became terrified, and fled.) Undaunted, Garshāsp advances on foot.

> *Bar-e azhdahā raft o befrākht dast / khadangi bepeyvast o bogshād shast*
> *Zad-ash bar galu kām o maghz-ash bedukht / ze peykān beh zakhm ātash andar forukht*
> *Cho befrākht sar digari zad beh khashm / ze khun chashmeh bogshād-ash az har do chashm*
> *Damid azhdahā hamcho abr az nahib / cho seyl andar āmad ze bālā beh shib*
> *Beh sineh bedarrid hāmun ze ham / separ dar-robud az delāvar beh dam*
> *Zad-ash pahlavān neyzeh-hā-i bar zafar / senān-ash az qafā raft yek rash be dar*
> *Dom-e azhdahā shod gosasteh beh dard / bar-afshānd bā mowj-e khun zahr-e zard*
> *Beh kām andar-ash neyzeh-ye āhanin / beh dandān cho suhān beyāzad beh kin*
> *Beh gorz-e garān yākht mard-e delir / dar āmad khorushandeh chun tond shir*
> *Bedān-sān hami zad-ash bā zur o hang / keh az koh beh zakhm-ash hami rikht sang*
> *Sar o maghz-ash āmikht bā khāk o khun / shod ān jānevar kuh-e jangi negun*
> *Hameh jowshan-ash z-ān dam o zahr-e tiz / bejushid o bar jāy shod riz-riz*
> *Zamāni beyoftād bi hush o rāy / cho āmad beh hosh rāst bar shod beh jāy*[213]

(He went before the *azhdahā* and raised his hand, nocked a poplar shaft and let fly from the thumb-ring
He struck it in the throat, stitched its maw and brain; the arrowhead sparked fire in the wound
When it raised its head, again he struck it with rage; he made fountains of blood spurt from both its eyes
The *azhdahā* hissed like a cloud out of anger; like a flood it descended from the height down the slope
With its chest it tore the field apart; it snatched away the brave man's shield with its breath
The champion struck his spears against its mouth; his lance went a cubit into its neck
The *azhdahā*'s tail grew disjointed with pain; yellow poison spurted in bloody waves
Into its maw, the iron spear lunged vengefully towards its teeth like a file
The brave man lashed out with the heavy mace; he came on roaring like a harsh lion
In that way he kept striking it with strength and power, so that the blood from its wounds kept pouring down the mountain
Its head and brains mixed with the dust and blood; that creature became a warlike mountain overturned
From that breath and sharp venom, his whole hauberk boiled and fell to pieces on the spot
For a time he fell, unconscious, unthinking; when he came to, he stood up where he was.")

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[213] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 59-60.

The use of the word *jānevar*—creature, soul-/life-possessing entity—in the description of the *azhdahā*'s death brings it even more definitively under the ambit of Garshāsp's prayer, which noted God's mastery over all *jānevar*. At the same time, it helps distance this monster from the more anthropomorphic *azhdahā* of the *Shāhnāmeh*. Nothing in its appearance or combat style suggest human traits; the comparisons to various arms and armor draws attention instead to the dehumanized hardware of war. Even the trope of stitching its mouth shut is altered to suggest merely a painful wound, rather than a silencing. Instead, the creature begins and ends as a mountain, an immense and implacable natural feature.

Sara Kuehn notes that in "shedding" his armor, Garshāsp seems to have "assimilated some of his adversary's positive ophidian characteristics, such as the shedding of the skin, an act that is symbolic of long or eternal life."[214] Garshāsp's becoming-monster is not as marked as those of the *Shāhnāmeh*'s more complex heroes, who are routinely trapped by fate into making horrific choices. But defying predictions of his death, the young hero has undoubtedly won both a renewed longevity and a share of undying fame. And much as Sām ended his combat stripped of his gear, Garshāsp is broken down to his mere self through his struggle against the elemental force of the *azhdahā*.

He again thanks God, noting that without divine aid he himself would be helpless. His companions, seeing his fleeing horse, at first fear he has been killed, and lament him until he calls out to them and comes charging into view. Garshāsp is quick to assign a broader meaning to his victory: *Yal-e niv goft ānkeh bad-khwāh-e mā-st / chonān bād bichāreh k-ān azhdahā-st*[215] ("The brave hero said: Whoever wishes us ill, may he become as helpless as that *azhdahā*.")

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[214] Kuehn, *Dragon*, 170.
[215] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 61.

Thus begins the process of turning the *azhdahā* into a symbol. Invoked to presage all victories over Garshāsp's enemies, its symbolic valence shifts, transposed from the grandeur and ferocity usually invoked by the word *azhdahā* to the "helplessness" of its shattered body. Here, triumph over the monster allows the hero to confine it within particular rhetorical frames. This discursive control continues through the retrieval and presentation of the taxidermied trophy. The beast is hauled back to court, its vastness again emphasized by the twenty carts and five groaning elephants needed to transport it.[216] When Garshāsp arrives with his quarry, *Pazireh shod az shahr bornā o pir / az ān azhdahā khireh o ze zakhm-e tir / Beh sahrā berun charm-ash ākandeh kāh / nehādand tā did zahhāk shāh*[217] ("He was welcomed into the city; young and old were astonished by that *azhdahā* and the arrow wounds / Out in the desert, they set up its hide filled with straw, until King Zahhāk could see it.") Both the monster and the evidence of its mortality astonish the populace. Exhibiting its body out in the desert allows a degree of distance to persist between the city and the wilderness; unlike the hide Sultan Mahmud exhibited at Ghaznin, it is not fully incorporated into civilized space. At the same time, by replacing the living creature with its straw-filled corpse, the city exerts itself over the hinterlands; renders their denizens viewable not only to the intrepid few but to "young and old" alike.

The rituals of signification are still not quite finished. As a token of his first victory, Garshāsp receives a heraldic emblem. *Az ān k-azhdahā kosht o shiri nemud / derafsh chonān sākht k-az har do bud / beh zir-e derafsh azhdahā-ye seyāh / ze bar shir-e zarrin o bar sar-ash māh*[218] ("Since he had killed an *azhdahā* and shown himself a lion, a flag was made featuring both: on the lower part of the flag, a black *azhdahā*; on the upper, a golden lion with a moon

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[216] "*Ze gardun beham bist o az pil panj / boda z bār-e ān azhdahā zir ranj*" (Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 62).
[217] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 63.
[218] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 63.

above its head.") From then on throughout the epic, this will be referenced as the *azhdahā-fash derafsh*, "the *azhdahā*-like banner." Garshāsp thus carries this first triumph with him throughout his subsequent conquests. Defined by the monster he has killed, he subsumes its power into his personal symbolic register.

Earthly and Celestial *Azhdahā*

Garshāsp soon sets out for India. For a considerable portion of the epic, exotic locales (first East, then West) serve as a backdrop for a series of battles, discoveries, and philosophical dialogues. Frustratingly for the modern reader, these exploits have no discernible impact on the hero himself. Rather, they serve an encyclopedic function, encoding knowledge and wisdom within a narrative structure. Asadi-Tusi's text constructs a world, rather than a character; an ever-expanding cosmos that the narrator insists is our own, even as he fills it with wonders that test belief.

Real and figurative *azhdahā* continue to play prominent roles within this poetic universe. In an esoteric debate that Garshāsp holds with an Indian brahmin, the four elements (*ātash, khāk, āb, bād*; fire, earth, water, wind) are represented by four *azhdahā* hanging from a vault over a wide carpet (symbolizing the heavens and earth, respectively.) The brahmin's warnings return to the equation of the monster with mortality: *Beh jān o beh tan z-ān chahār azhdahā / beh giti nayāyad kasi z-u rahā / … / Bedin har chahār-ast giti beh band / v-az-ishān beh jān nist kas bi gazand*[219] ("No one in the world escapes from those four *azhdahā* in body and soul; … Those four hold the world in bondage; and no one's soul is without their bite.") The specification of both body (*tan*) and soul (*jān*) as targets of the *azhdahā*'s bite makes it clear that the *azhdahā-ye*

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[219] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 145.

zamin and *azhdahā-ye falak* do not simply correspond to physical and metaphysical dangers, respectively. Imagined metaphorically as four intertwined monsters, the elemental world causes both corporeal and spiritual harm to those living within it. Furthermore, this harm does not simply occur at the impending moment of death but is always present within every soul—not just mortality but ongoing awareness of it. Already wounded, Garshāsp neither resigns himself to death nor retreats from the world. His persistence in heroic action comes to represent a refusal of existential despair.

As Garshāsp's travels bring him into contact with the marvels of creation, he demonstrates that the mere act of witnessing these can comprise heroic service towards God. On the Indian island of Rāmani, he sees a *simorgh* carrying off a beast described both as a *nahang* and as *chehel rash fazun azhdahā-i*, "an *azhdahā* over forty cubits long." Given the immense symbolic weight of both the *azhdahā* and the *simorgh*, there is a tension in this image of the reptilian monster overcome by the king of birds. Does it suggest that the power of the lurking celestial *azhdahā* will eventually fall before divine might? Or does this unusual act of predation simply enmesh both these marvelous creatures within a food-chain, making them ecological beings equally subordinated to natural order? Garshāsp seems to adopt this latter reading when the sight occasions another of his prayers to the creator—*beh har kār binā vo dānā to-i / beh har āfarinesh tavānā to-i*[220] ("You are the one for whom every action is seeable and knowable; you are the one with power over every created thing.") Garshāsp's discoveries are always already under God's purview. The hero's seeing them and making them narratable, however, adds new "created things" to the roster that humans may now attribute to the creator. The poem thus validates its own encyclopedic interests.

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[220] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 153-4.

At the same time, it maintains its epic credentials, never relegating Garshāsp to mere spectatorship for long. A nearby island provides a paradigmatic occasion for him to demonstrate manly vigor:

> Beraftand o āmad jaziri padid / keh ān jā beh joz azhdahā kas nadid
> Bedānsān bozorg azhdahā k-az do mil / bayubāshtandi beh dam zendeh-pil
> Ze zahr-ash hameh kuh o hāmun seyāh / dam o dud-shān rafteh bar charkh o māh
> Yek-ā-yek parākandeh bar dasht o ghār / zabān chun derakht o dahān chun dahār
> Yeki rā dom az halqeh har su cho dām / damān ātash az zakhm-e dandān o kām
> Yeki z-u keshān gisovān gerd-e khwish / beh sar bar soru rasteh chun gāv-mish[221]

(They went and an island came into view, where they saw nothing but *azhdahā*
Such huge *azhdahā* that from two miles away they could suck down wild elephants with
    their breath
From their venom, all the mountain and plain were black; their breath and smoke went to
    the heavens and moon
One by one they were scattered over the prairie and caves, tongues like trees and mouths
    like chasms
One with its tail making rings on all sides like a snare, breathing fire from the wound of
    its teeth and maw
One of them trailing its braids around it; on its head horns stood like a water-buffalo's.)

This swarm of *azhdahā* explodes the convention of the solitary top predator. On this island, there is *only* anomaly; a population that is not only monstrous compared to other creatures but monstrously varied within itself. The *azhdahā* are scattered across the island's biomes, even as their presence warps its atmosphere. Their biological diversity defies summary—they can only be described one by one, in montage. Notably, the *gisu*-bearing *azhdahā* from the *Shāhnāmeh* makes its only appearance in the *Garshāspnāmeh* in this passage, illustrating not any particularly human quality of an individual beast but rather the heterogeneity of the monstrous collective. At the same time, as with the *simorgh*'s predation, the island of *azhdahā* demonstrates a wondrous realism. *Azhdahā* are not only or necessarily singular creatures emerging suddenly

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[221] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 165.

out of dramatic necessity. In some places, Asadi-Tusi suggests, they are multiple, indigenous, and without contingency.

Although these *azhdahā* are perhaps unique in representing no danger to human civilization, Garshāsp prepares to attack them. His crew protests:

> *Hami goft har kas keh bā jān setiz / majuy o mashow dar dam-e rastakhiz*
> *Basi azhdahā-ye damān idar-ast / kaz ān k-ash to koshti basi mehtar-ast*
> *Cheh bā azhdahā razm rā sākhtan / cheh mar marg rā b-ārezu khwāstan*
> *Hamān niz mallāh farzāneh hush / mashow goft o bar jān sepordan makush*
> *Bedin guneh mār-ast k-az zahr-e tāb / konad mard rā ārezumand-e āb*
> *Labān kafteh o teshneh o ruy zard / bovad del tapān tā bemirad beh dard*
> *Hamān niz mār-ast k-az zahr o khashm / bemirad har ānkas bar-afkanad chashm*
> *V-az ān mār k-az dam-ash bād-e samum / beh mordār bar āyad godāzad chu mum*
> *Degar hast k-az vey tan-e mard khun / gerad jush v-az pust āyad berun*
> *Va z-ān ham keh gar koshteh-ye zahr-e uy / kasi binad u niz mirad beh buy*[222]
>
> (Everyone kept saying: Don't seek out strife with your soul; don't go into the breath of
>   resurrection
> There are many hissing *azhdahā* here, much bigger than that one you killed
> When you prepare to battle *azhdahā*, then wish only for death.
> That wise learned mariner also said: Don't go, don't strive to give up your soul
> There are these types of snakes whose burning venom makes men desire water;
> Lips split and parched, face yellow, their hearts thumping until they die in pain.
> There are also snakes whose venom and rage kill anyone who sets eyes on them;
> And among those snakes, those whose breath is the simoom wind, that when it touches
>   them melts corpses like wax
> Another is that who makes blood swirl in a man's body and then burst out his skin
> And also those that if one looks upon a corpse dead from their venom, he too will die
>   from its scent.)

Many of these warnings echo those of Garshāsp's father Esret—the immensity of the current threat compared to those overcome in the past, the equation of seeking out monsters with wishing for death. The knowledgeable sailor takes the opportunity to catalogue different varieties of snake venom, providing not only another semi-relevant body of trivia but also a graphic description of mortal vulnerability. The five deaths he describes, based in theories about the

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[222] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 165-166.

effects of different poisons on the humoral system, do not explicitly await Garshāsp—the language swerves quickly from the particular to the general. Rather, they demonstrate the frailty of the human body, which snakebite highlights in clinical detail. Literal here, these wounds recall the brahmin's council that we have all already been bitten; that coincident with our material existence, our disintegration has already begun.

Just as he ignored his father's warnings, Garshāsp rejects his crew's appeals, "*k-az-in jāygah bar nagardam konun / magar rāndeh az azhdahā ju-ye khun*"[223] ("for from this place, I will not now return until a river of blood has been spilled from the *azhdahā*.") Unlike his first battle against an *azhdahā*, this one is not motivated by fidelity to his king or a desire to make a heroic name for himself. It is an almost perfunctory response to the proximity of danger, and though the poet has seemingly raised the stakes since Garshāsp's boyhood encounter—now there are many more of the monsters, and they are much larger—the battle scene itself is almost comically short and anti-climactic: "*Begoft in o tark-ash por az tir kard / bepushid kheftān zarreh zir kard / Separ dar bar afkand bā gorz o tigh / berun raft bar sān-e ghorrandeh migh / Sarāsar shakh o sanglākh-e dorosht / begasht o az ān azhdahā shesh bekosht / Beh shamshir tan-shān hameh rizeh kard / sarān-shān beborrid o bar neyzeh kard.*"[224] ("He said this and filled his quiver with arrows, put on his gambeson under his armor / Threw his shield before him, with mace and blade, then went out like a roaring thundercloud / He passed right over all the peaks and crags, and killed six of those *azhdahā* / He cut their bodies to pieces with his sword, cut off their heads and stuck them on spears.") The massacre is effortless, setting an unprecedented ratio of *azhdahā* killed per line of poetry and leaving the hero himself unscathed. When he returns, his men are forced to admit that "*agar azhdahā bāshad ar pil o karg / bar-e tigh-e u nist iman ze*

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[223] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 166.
[224] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 166.

marg"[225] ("Whether it be an *azhdahā* or an elephant or a rhinoceros, before his blade it has no safety from death.") Garshāsp is positioned here as an inescapable hunter imposing death upon even the mightiest of creatures, wreaking upon the *azhdahā* the same destruction that they are wont to wreak upon other prey. Yet the hero's involvement in wild ecosystems functions as yet another reminder of his mortality. To participate in the tooth-and-claw struggles of predation is to concede life's contingency. Despite his effortless triumph here, Garshāsp's appointment with fate is postponed (this scene occurs less than halfway through the poem), but not abrogated.

A Final Boss

Many of Garshāsp's subsequent exploits pit him against a multinational variety of human foes. His travels lead him into encounters with a whole spectrum of peoples; the exigencies of epic mean that these encounters are overwhelming violent. Speculative modes are generally downplayed during these conflicts, though a particular scene memorably restages the connection between monsters and magic: in one battle, Turānian sorcerers summon celestial *azhdahā* and flying serpents alongside an array of other unpleasant meteorological phenomena to assail the Iranians.[226] Generally, though, the combat is realistic (setting aside the superheroic prowess of the main character). However, as his life draws to a close, Garshāsp's performs one last heroic feat in overcoming another hybrid monster. Returning from battle against the king of Tangier, he and his army come across an eerily empty town. Interrogating the few inhabitants they are able to find, they are told:

… / yeki bisheh nazdik-e in marz-e mā-st

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[225] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 166.
[226] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 395.

Dadi dar vey az pil mehtar beh tan / cho tond azhdahā zahr-pāsh az dahan
Tan-e u yeki hasht pāy o do sar / sar-ash az do su pāy zir o ze bar
Cho shod pāy zirin-ash az kār o sāz / begardad bar ān pāy k-ash az farāz
Ham-ash chang-e shir-ast o ham zur-e pil / bedarrad beh āvāz kuh az do mil
Shegefti-st juyān-e khun āmadeh / ze daryā-ye khāvar berun āmadeh
Beh chang az koh o bisheh shir āvarad / beh dam kargas az abr zir āvarad
Kamini nehad har zamān az nahān / barad har keh yābad ze mā nāgahān
Beh rāh-esh bovim az nahān dideh-dār / gorizim chun u shavad āshkār
Tohi shod deh az mardom o chārpāy / namānd-ast joz mā kas idar be jāyi[227]

(… / There's a grove near this border of ours,
A beast in it, its body greater than an elephant / like a harsh *azhdahā*, spraying poison from
       its mouth
It's got one body, eight legs, and two heads; the heads on each end, legs below and on top
When its lower leg gets put to use, it turns around with the leg it has above
It has the claws of a lion and the strength of an elephant; its voice splits mountains two
       miles off
It's a marvel come seeking blood, risen out of the eastern sea.
With its claws it brings lions from mountain and grove; with its breath, it brings down
       vultures from the clouds
It's always laying ambushes where it hides; it suddenly carries off any of us it finds.
We keep a watch on its path, in hiding; we flee when it appears.
The village became emptied of people and livestock; no one remains here besides us.")

This eight-legged, two-headed beast is among the most bizarre entries in the menagerie of epic *azhdahā*, at least in terms of morphology. Exactly what Asadi-Tusi envisions with regards to its appendages is unclear; perhaps a sort of cephalopod, with an assortment of flexible limbs, though these ultimately play no role in the battle. As a marine intruder onto the land, it recalls the monster Garshāsp defeated in his childhood; its singular nature as *shegefti*, a marvel, lends it back some of the dramatic weight that the swarming insular *azhdahā* did not possess. The locals beg Garshāsp to deliver them; always the obliging champion, he marches his army to the grove.

Chonān tang dar ham yeki bisheh bud / keh raftan dar-u kār-e andisheh bud
Derakhtān-ash sar dar keshideh beh sar / cho khatt-e dabirān yek andar degar
Hameh shākh-hā tā beh charkh-e kabud / beh ham bar-shodeh tang chun tār o pud

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[227] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 454.

To gofti sepāhi-st dar jang-e sakht / va-z-u hast gordi degar har derakht
Keshān shākh-hā neyzeh o gorz bār / separ barg-hā o senān nuk-e khār
Ze bas barg riz-ash gah-e bād-e tiz / gerefti jahān har zamān rastakhiz
Natābidi andar vey az charkh hur / ze tangi besudi dar u pust-e mur
Ney-ash gofti az barg o khār az gereh / magar tigh in dārad o ān zarreh[228]

(Such a crammed-together grove it was, that going in it was a fearful task
Its trees twisted their tops together, like a scribe's writing one upon the other
All the branches, up to the livid sky, were squeezed together like warp and weft
You'd say it was an army in a hard battle, and each and every tree of it a hero;
The trailing branches spears, the fruit maces; shields the leaves, lances the thorn-tips
So many leaves fell when the wind blew sharp, the world always seemed new-risen
No sunlight shone into it from the sky; so tight an ant's skin would chafe there.
Its reeds so thick with leaves, its thorns so knotted, you'd say the one had blades, the other
    armor.)

This in-depth description of the monster's lair heightens the atmosphere of menace, conjuring an acute claustrophobia. But there is real complexity to the pathetic fallacy here. The wild grove is compared again and again to the trappings of human civilization: first to penmanship (*khatt-e dabirān*), then to textile (*tār o pud*), then finally, at greatest length, to an army enmeshed in combat. Technological achievement and natural wonder belong to the same world; both invoke horror and wonder, creativity and destruction. The grove encapsulates the earth that Garshāsp has roved over the course of his long life; this is made explicit by the shifting leaves, which constantly re-shape the world (*jahān*) in a constant state of resurrection (*rastakhiz*, literally referring to the rising of the dead at the end of time). Within this dense (and densely metaphorical) space, the *azhdahā* itself seems almost defiantly literal.

Beh pahlu-ye bisheh yeki āb-e kand / bar-ash khofteh dad hamchun kuhi boland
Bepushid kheftān-e kin pahlavān / bar-afkand bar pil bar-gostavān
Beh sanduq bar raft bā sāz-e jang / hami rānd tā nazd-e u raft tang
So-ye rowshan-e pāk bar-dāsht dast / az u khwāst zur o beh zānu neshast
Zeh āvord bar charkh-e peykār bar / ze dast-ash gereh zad be sufār bar
Yeki faylaki sud-e sendān gozār / bezad dukht bar ham zafar-ash ostovār
Dad ān gah sar az jāy bar kard tiz / beh pil andar āmad beh khashm o setiz

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228 Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 455.

Beh changāl befkand khortum-e uy / beh dandān bekand-ash sar az tan cho guy
Zad-ash neyzeh bar sineh gord-e delir / ze sanduq bā gorz-e kin jost zir
Chonān kuft bar sar-ash k-az zakhm-e sakht / dar ān bisheh bi barg o bar shod derakht
Hami chand zad bar sar-ash gorz-e jang / tan-e pil khast u be dandān o chang
Chonin tā hameh rikht maghz-e sar-ash / beh zahr o beh khun gharqeh gashteh bar-ash
Bemālid rokh pahlavān bar zamin / gereft āfarin bar jahān āfarin
Keh kard-ash bar ān zesht patyāreh chir / keh ham azhdahā bud o ham pil o shir
Hamān gah beyākand charm-ash beh kāh / bar-afkand bar pil o bar-dāsht rāh.[229]

(Beside the grove there was a gully; by it, the beast slept like a tall mountain.
The champion put on the gambeson of vengeance; he fastened the barding to his elephant.
He went up into the howdah with instruments of war; he drove on until he came close to it.
He raised his hands to the pure light, asked him for strength and fell to his knees
He strung the bow, set the arrow-notch against the knot
He loosed a forked arrow weighted like an anvil; it struck, stitched together its mighty mouth
The beast then lifted its head up sharply; it fell upon the elephant with rage and ferocity
With its claws it ripped off its trunk; with its teeth, gnawed its head from its body like a ball
The brave hero struck a lance into its chest; from the howdah he descended with the mace of vengeance
He smashed it on the head so hard that all the trees in the grove lost their leaves and fruit
He struck it some more on the head with his war-mace, while it gashed the elephant's body with its teeth and claws
This went on until all the brains flowed from its head; its chest drowned in venom and blood
On the ground, the champion scored his cheeks, and heaped praise on the World-Creator
Who had given him victory over that ugly monster, which was at once an *azhdahā*, an elephant, and a lion.)

Just like Garshāsp's first *azhdahā*, this one presents itself at first as a mountain, before the

hero's attack stirs it to action. But this is the almost the only figurative language in the entire scene

(besides the rather flat reference to the elephant's severed head as being *chu guy*, "like a ball.")

Otherwise, the action is straightforward and uninterrupted. The battle feels indebted to Goshtāsp's

struggle against the *gorg/azhdahā* in Rum—the forested setting, the monster's chimeric features,

the extreme violence it wreaks upon the hero's mount (an elephant rather than a horse, in this case).

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[229] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 455-456.

Embedded in this tropological structure, the outcome is never in doubt; even the destruction of Garshāsp's pachyderm does not seem to occasion any particular increase in peril.

Yet by bringing his hero back into one-on-one confrontation with an *azhdahā*, Asadi-Tusi signals Garshāsp's impending death. The re-staging of his youthful battle, in all the gory detail absent from his mid-career massacre of the island monsters, strongly implies the closing of the frame without compromising Garshāsp's battlefield invincibility. This final appearance of the earthly *azhdahā* presages the long-promised arrival of its celestial counterpart. As he prepares to die shortly thereafter, the hero makes this connection explicit:

> *Chonin goft k-āy nāmdārān-e man / hameh nik-del gham-gosārān-e man*
> *Marā z-izad āmad beh raftan payām / bar asp shodan kardam aknun lagām*
> *Cheh bar azhdahā o cheh bar div o shir / beh mardi bodam gāh-e peykār chir*
> *Konun bā kasi khwāstam kārezār / keh pish-ash natābad cho man sad hezār*
> *Cherā khovār shod marg o mā chun cherā / beh jān khwardan-ash nist chun o cherā*
> *Damān azhdahā-i-st rizandeh khun / sar o dast si-sad hezār-ash fozun*
> *Beh har sar-ash bar sad dahān-ast pish / beh har dast bar chang si-sad cho bish*
> *Beh har jānevar chang-e tiz-ash derāz / beh har sar-sh chun dideh-bān dideh-bāz*
> *Natābad ze pil o natarsad ze shir / nah az kin shavad māndeh n-az khward sir…*[230]

> (Thus he said: O my noblemen! All you fair-hearted ones who sorrow for me
> I have received a summons from God; now I bridle my horse to mount
> Whether against *azhdahā*, against demons or lions, through courage I was victorious in battle
> Now I go to fight with another one, whom a hundred thousand like me have failed to avoid
> Indeed death becomes abject, and we become like 'why's; about its soul-eating, there is no 'because' or 'why'
> It's a hissing *azhdahā* spilling blood, with more than a hundred thousand heads and hands
> On each of its heads, a hundred mouths jut; on each hand, three thousand claws like poisonous roots
> It stretches its sharp claws over every creature; eyes like watchman wide on every head
> It does not avoid the elephant, it does not fear the lion; it never grows sated with vengeance, nor full of its feed…)

[230] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 460-461.

Always victorious against physical *azhdahā*, Garshāsp now prepares himself for a
doomed confrontation against the cosmic *azhdahā*, whose myriad fractal appendages dwarf the
two-headed monster of his last victory. The qualities of this creature mirror those of its earthly
counterparts, but exaggerated into a general condition. This is no anomaly risen disastrously
from the sea only to be eliminated. It is a constant and omnipresent threat, time as predation (*jān-
khwardan*, the consumption of lives/souls.) And whereas Garshāsp has always made a point of
defying odds, of overcoming obstacles that allegedly could not be overcome, here he has no
illusions. No longer exceptional, he becomes in death like all other mortals—one of a hundred
thousand, a creature (*jānevar*) like those he spent his life wondering at and slaughtering.

Lamenting the old hero at the poem's close, Fereydun echoes and extends these
observations:

> *Jahān chun yeki haft-sar azhdahā-st / kasi nist k-az chang o nāb-ash rahā-st /*
> *dahān-ash ātash-ast o shab o ruz dam / havā sineh dom āb o hāmun shekam /*
> *bar u haft sar haft charkh az farāz / setāreh hameh chashm-ash az dur bāz /*
> *sarāsar shekam hast-ash anbāshteh / ze bas guneh-gun har kas ubāshteh /*
> *cheh farzānegān o cheh mardān-e gord / cheh khubān cheh shāhān bā dastbord.*[231]

> (The world is like a seven-headed *azhdahā*; there's no one who can flee its claws and
>   fangs.
> Its mouth is fire, its breath night and day; the air its chest, its tail water, the ground its
>   belly;
> the seven heads on it are the seven spheres above; the stars all its eyes, open from afar;
> its belly is completely stuffed; plenty of people, all kinds, get swallowed up;
> whether they are wise ones, or heroic men; whether good, whether victorious kings.)

The created cosmos that inspired Garshāsp's adventures and prayers is identical to the
monster that brings him (and all others) down in the end. To manifest physically is to represent
God's works, to engage them through experience, and to sacrifice oneself to unrelenting

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[231] Asadi-Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 472.

elemental impermanence. This is equally true of the hero and of the beasts he conquers; his heroism, which so often seems the main determinant of his victories, is relegated here to irrelevance.

For all its dramatic shortcomings, Asadi-Tusi's poem is animated by a tug-of-war between the blessing of creation's wondrous bounty and the curse of being created as a mortal being. Bracketing Garshāsp's heroic *vita* and prowling just beyond the margins of his life, the figure of the *azhdahā* serves to embody this tension throughout the work. Inhabitants of the distant past, these creatures are no longer available as a ready source of wonder for Asadi-Tusi's eleventh-century audience. But through the *azhdahā-ye falak*, the historically contingent *azhdahā-ye zamin* springs free from a monster-infested legendary history into an eternal cosmic presence. Both a marvelous beast and an existential demon, the monster becomes integral to the *Garshāspnāmeh*'s exhaustively explored universe.

4. Being Consumed in the *Bahmannāmeh*

Roughly fifty years after the *Garshāspnāmeh*, a pair of poetic works appeared that offered a dramatically revisionist take on the classical Persian epic. Like Asadi-Tusi's poem, they are set within the historical bounds of the *Shāhnāmeh*, but offer divergent visions of its events and figures. The author of these texts is a shadowy figure, so poorly-documented that even his name is not certain—while there is a general consensus around the form Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l-Khayr, it is spelled "Irānshān" or even "Inshān" in some manuscripts.[232] The poet's obscurity has perhaps contributed to the lack of attention paid to the poems, which despite the

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[232] Jalal Matini, "Kuš-Nāma," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition (2008), http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kus-nama-part-of-a-mythical-history-of-iran.

existence of critical editions remain untranslated into any Western language and minimally studied. This is a shame, as the *Bahmannāmeh* (completed between 1092-1108 CE?) and *Kushnāmeh* (1108-1111 CE?) represent fascinating attempts to center villainy within legendary history. The *Kushnāmeh*, which narrates the horrific deeds of the eponymous elephant-headed nephew of Zahhāk, is an extended exploration of the relationship between monstrosity and tyranny.[233] But it is the earlier *Bahmannāmeh* that contains two of the most striking encounters with *azhdahā* in the entire Persian epic corpus. While indebted to the depictions that preceded them, these scenes reimagine their monsters with striking originality. In one, the *azhdahā* is a sexually rapacious weather system that holds a kingdom under its thrall; in the second, it is at once a force of fate and an all-too-real predator that devours the poem's titular character, a horrifying fusion of the earthly and celestial *azhdahā* conceptualized by Asadi-Tusi.

Irānshāh's work does not seem to have been widely read. There is only a single manuscript of the *Kushnāmeh*; and while there are a handful of *Bahmannāmeh*s (W. L. Hanaway lists four manuscripts and a lithograph[234]), it never seems to have been incorporated into *Shāhnāmeh* manuscripts. This is in spite of its filling a valuable role: versifying the gory death of King Bahman. While Ferdowsi's Bahman dies of illness,[235] a rather more exciting tale circulated widely in which the monarch is swallowed by an *azhdahā*. Indeed, prose summaries and

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[233] The metaphor of the "body politic," familiar to Western medievalists from the thought of, e.g., John of Salisbury, was equally known and discussed in Islamic societies, with the king often thought of as either the heart or as a physician keeping all the parts healthy and coordinated (Vasileios Syros, "Galenic medicine and Social Stability in Early Modern Florence and the Islamic Empires," *Journal of Early Modern History* 17, no. 2 (2013): 176-183). A reading of the *Kushnāmeh* in terms of a monstrous form embodying a society out of joint would therefore not be amiss; at the very least, it would likely prove a more fruitful approach than treating the poem as a useful source for excavating the truth of Sasanian-Kushan diplomatic relations from a millennium before its composition (Saghi Gazerani, "Kush-e Pildandān, the Anti-Hero: Polemics of Power in Late Antique Iran," *Iranian Studies* 52, no. 5-6 (2019): 859-901.)

[234] W. L. Hanaway, "Bahman-Nāma," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, III/5 (2011): 499-500, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahman-nama-epic-poem.

[235] Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, *V*, 487.

abbreviated *Shāhnāmeh*s often included this version;[236] it is evident in the surviving records of

naqqāli oral performance, and forms the opening section of Abu Tāher Mohammad Tārsusi's

twelfth-century prose romance, the *Dārābnāmeh*.[237] But fully versified *Shāhnāmeh*s, presumably

lacking *masnavi* lines for such a scene, stuck to the more prosaic demise. Given the

uncompromising brutality with which Irānshāh depicts the devouring, though, the neglect of his

version may testify less to its obscurity than to its bleakness.

Irānshāh makes it clear that his historical interest is linked to current concerns, writing

that the deeds of contemporary kings remind him of Bahman.[238] While on the surface this seems

like the standard flattery of rulers through comparison to illustrious men of the past, the course of

the epic reveals this comment to be a sharp critique. Bahman is an overbearing, homicidal tyrant,

who relentlessly hounds the house of Sistān in revenge for Rostam's slaying of his father,

Esfandiyār. Rostam's death early in the poem is no deterrent; Bahman hunts down and executes

the hero's son, Farāmarz, imprisons the aged Zāl, and pursues Rostam's warlike daughters and

other descendants. An incompetent general, he is frequently bested in battle. His death in the

jaws of an *azhdahā* makes him the only epic character to fail in his encounter with such a beast, a

devastating betrayal of heroic, royal, and narrative conventions.[239] In the poem's excruciating

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[236] For example, British Library Royal 16 B. xiv and Beinecke Persian MSS 75.

[237] Abu Tāher Mohammad ebn-e 'Ali ebn-e Musā al-Tarsusi, *Dārābnāmeh*, ed. Zabihollāh Safā (Tehrān: Bongāh-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketāb, 1344-46 [1965-68]).

[238] Hakim Irānshāh ebn-e Abi-l Khayr, *Bahmannāmeh*, ed. Rahim 'Afifi (Tehrān: Enteshārāt-e 'Elmi va Farhangi, 1380 [2001-2002]), 12.

[239] There is, arguably, one exception. It occurs not in an epic poem but in an early example of the *'ajā'ib al-makhluqāt* genre, the *'Ajā'ebnāmeh* of Mohammad ben Mahmud Hamadāni (alternately, Tusi), which dates to the second half of the 12th century CE.

> *Ammā azhdarhā kam bāshad va dar har 'ahdi yeki bovad. Chenān keh dar 'ahd-e esfandiyār malek-e 'ajam yeki padid āmad dar hodud-e kashmir va eqlimhā birān mi kard va dar hodudi ke āmadi mardom bar khāstandi. Esfandiyār dar in ehtemām bud ke man khodā rā cheh guyam keh mazerrat-e in azhdarhā az ra'eyyat bar nadāram? Lashkar bar dāsht va qasd-e kashmir kard va lashkar rā goft az man bedorud bāshid keh man in hayvān rā khwāham koshtan. Mardom-e ān hodud goftand bā khod zenhār makhwar keh har keh in qesd konad, bāz nayāyad. Va agar khwāhi ke bedāni sefat-e u bar sar-e felān kuh ro va yek shab ānjā moqām kon tā hāl-e vey bedāni. Ān shab bar sar-e ān kuh raft. Hameh shab az ān hodud ātesh bar mi*

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depiction of the king's end, it makes perhaps the clearest bid in Persian epic for a reading of the *azhdahā* in darkly anti-anthropocentric terms, prefiguring the work of theorists like Mark Fisher and Eugene Thacker.

A Monstrous Atmosphere

The first *azhdahā* in Irānshāh's text, however, is at least as interesting as the concluding devourer. Both of these monsters appear in the poem's final seventh, and as such their proximity encourages them to be read alongside one another. Furthermore, both are associated with Farāmarz's grandson Borzin-e Āzar (often referred to as Āzar Borzin in discussions of the text), a young warrior who comes as close as any character in the epic to traditional notions of heroism (*javānmardi*, "chivalry," literally "young-manliness"). But Borzin-e Āzar's confrontations with

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khāst va dar havā mi raft va nāpadid mi shod. Goftand in hayvān dam mi zanad va nafas-e vey ātesh mi gardad. Chun ruz bud, dudi siyāh az vey dar havā mi raft. Esfandiyār manjaniqi besākht va tighi bar dāsht va farmud keh vey rā beh ān hodud andāzand. Chun dar sar-e azhdarhā oftād, tigh bar miyān-e vey zad vey rā beh do nim kard. Azhdarhā be vey jost har do bemordand va 'ālem az dast-e ān shum berast va sar rā fedā-ye ra'eyyat-e khod kard (Hamadāni, *'Ajā'ebnāmeh*, 313)

(But *azhdahā* are few, and in each age there is only one. So it was that in the age of Esfandiyār King of Persia, one appeared in the borderlands of Kashmir, and destroyed those regions, and in the borderlands where it came, the people rose up. Esfandiyār worried over this, saying, "What can I say to God, that I might relieve the common folk from the *azhdahā*'s destructiveness?" He raised an army and set out for Kashmir, and said to the army, "Bid me farewell, for I myself will slay this creature."The people of that borderland said, "Don't betray yourself; all those who seek to do this, do not return. And if you want to know what the animal is like, go to the summit of this one mountain, and stay there one night, that you might know its state." That night he went to the summit of that mountain. All night, from that borderland fire rose up and went into the sky and vanished. The people said, "This creature is exhaling, and its breath turns to fire." When it became day, black smoke went from it into the sky. Esfandiyār built a mangonel and drew a sword, and ordered that he be hurled towards that borderland. When he fell upon the head of the *azhdahā*, he struck his sword into its middle and cut it into two halves. The *azhdahā* rolled onto him and both died, and due to him the world avoided disaster; and he had sacrificed himself on behalf of his common folk.)

While this is one of the very moments in which the *'ajā'ib* literature makes any attempt at interface with the epic genre, the account itself is incredibly idiosyncratic. Ferdowsi's Esfandiyār never becomes king; while his encounter with an *azhdahā* does involve the construction of a powerful device, he employs it successfully and emerges essentially unharmed. Bahman's death, by contrast, features no reliance on mechanism; he is swallowed, not crushed; and as his killer survives, his demise cannot be viewed as a valiant sacrifice. There may be a note of comedy here in the highly unlikely deployment of the mangonel (*manjaniq*), a rock-launching siege engine, to hurl a human projectile; likewise in the rather inglorious smushing of the king. Whatever its origins, though, this bizarre tale further indicates the eccentricity of Iranshāh's *azhdahā* successively killing and eating its would-be-conqueror.

the two *azhdahā* complicate his portrayal, representing him as caught within systemic evil that exceeds his capacity for transformative action.

Out hunting in Pārs, Borzin-e Āzar and his retinue become lost. On the verge of starving, they encounter a young lion-hunter who directs them to the encampment of his father, Burāsp (often called Bivarasp in commentary on the poem[240]). Burāsp's realm is a paradise, a riverside plain overflowing with game. Borzin-e Āzar is astonished, several times asking who rules over the land—"*nadidam kasi k-in chonin bārgāh / nadārad chonin dastgah hich shāh*"[241] ("I've never seen anyone with such a court; no king has such wealth!") Burāsp dodges the question, explaining how here every nobleman judges according to his own heart, and people from all nations settle here and find satisfaction.

The ruler then switches the subject, explaining how the lion-hunting youth who directed Borzin-e Āzar to the camp is in fact his daughter, a great warrior. In a few days, a new year's[242] tournament will be held to find her a husband, and suitors are arriving from all lands. However, she will only marry one who both defeats her in combat[243] and overcomes her father's black champion wrestler. At this moment, the princess appears, and Irānshāh introduces her with a telling epithet: *Darin bud k-ān azhdahā-ye delir / biyāmad ze bisheh gerefteh do shir*[244] ("Just then that brave *azhdahā* came from the grove, having caught two lions.") Identifying the girl as an *azhdahā* both confirms her status as a ferocious fighter and encapsulates the disjunctive wonder Borzin-e Āzar experiences as he re-genders and so reconsiders her. But it also introduces

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[240] This name is familiar to *Shāhnāmeh* readers as an alternate name for Zahhāk, though the potentially draconic resonances of the name are not made explicit in the *Bahmannāmeh*.
[241] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 513.
[242] Note that the Persian New Year, *Nowruz*, occurs at the spring equinox.
[243] The fighting princess motif in fact appears throughout the epic; Bahman faces off against his future wife Homāy, first in polo and then in armed combat (Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 125-6), while Rostam's warlike daughters fight a number of battles against Bahman.
[244] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 514.

the figure of the monster into this straightforwardly romantic scene, implying a looming if still inchoate danger.

Inspired by the princess's beauty, Borzin-e Āzar wins the wrestling match before facing off against the object of his affections. She is happy to see him win, and goes into the battle suspended between two emotions—*sari por ze kin o deli por ze mehr*, "head full of violence and heart full of love." Borzin-e Āzar, by contrast, comes to the battle "*be-sān-e yeki azhdahā-ye damān*"[245] (like a hissing *azhdahā*). By comparing him in turn to an *azhdahā*, the poet establishes not only the young man's prowess in this moment but also his suitability for the princess. This pair of *azhdahā* seem made for one another; yet at the same time, the doubled term creates an instability. The fighting *azhdahā* almost always functions as a half of a semantic pair, completed by its prey (helpless before it, as even lions prove before the princess) or by the hero (destined to overcome it, as Borzin-e Āzar is bound by dramatic convention to win his warrior bride). But when both combatants are *azhdahā*, the stakes are left in doubt. The repetition of the epithet suggests a fixation on the lurking figure of the monster, an insistence on its as-yet-unrevealed role in the story.

The princess fights well, but Borzin-e Āzar triumphs. Burāsp then asks if they can delay the wedding feast. The victorious hero complies, but some days later, notices his future father-in-law has become agitated and depressed. He asks the reason, and Burāsp replies in a speech that dramatically reframes the entire preceding episode:

> *Bedu goft k-ay māyeh-ye ruzgār / maporsam keh bar man derāz-ast kār*
> *Yeki kār pish āmad-ast-am shegoft / keh bā har kasi bāz natvān-sh goft*
> *Do sāl-ast tā in giyā-khwār-e man / tabāhi nemudeh-st dar kār-e man*
> *Cho āyad bahārān o ordibehesht / hameh dasht gardad besān-e behesht*
> *Jahāni beh rāmesh goshāyand dast / marā bā gham o gorm bāyad neshast*

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[245] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 519.

Bebāyad marā dokhtar ārāstan / beh kerdār-e sarvi beh pirāstan
Ze pirāyeh-i bar tan-ash zivari / beh sar bar nehādan ze zarr afsari
Besuzand bas 'ud chandān beh dasht / keh pirāmon-e u nashāyad gozasht
Ferestād bāyad beh jā-ye boland / neshāndan bedān jāyegah mostmand
Yeki pāreh abr andar āyad ze kuh / keh az didan-ash div gardad sotuh
Khorushān o ātesh ze pish-ash jehān / 'eyān tiragi o sepidi nehān
Beh gerd-ash cho gard andar āyad cho dud / shavad dokhtar-e man siyāh o kabud
Zamāni bebāshad shavad nāpadid / beh giti kas in shegefti nadid
Va-z-u dokhtar āngah cho gardad rahā / rah-e kuh girad ham andar havā
Bebāshad mar ān dokhtar-am mostmand / do hafteh beh khāneh tabāh o nezhand
Ziyān-ash nadidand az ān sar-keshān / ze mohr-e khodā-yi-sh bar vey neshān

(He said to him: O source of fate, don't ask why my woes have become interminable
Something has happened to me, a wonder that cannot be repeated to anyone.
It's two years ago that these grazers of mine became a disaster among my affairs.
When spring comes, and Ordibehesht, all the plain appears like paradise
Throughout the world, all open their hands to pleasure, while we must sit in grief and
    anguish.
My daughter must be adorned, ornamented like a cypress tree
With ornaments: gold and gems on her body, and a golden tiara set on her head.
Then much sandalwood is burned upon the plain, so that none might pass near her.
She must be sent to a high place and set in that spot, miserable
A scrap of cloud descends from the mountain; seeing it, a demon would be terrified.
Roaring, with fire darting before it; light becomes darkness; clarity, obscurity.
Dustlike, it envelops her like smoke; my daughter becomes black and livid
For a while, she remains invisible; no one in the world has seen such a wonder.
And when the girl escapes from it, it takes its way back to the mountain through the air.
Then for two weeks, miserable, that daughter of mine remains at home, ruined and
    distraught,
Those proud princes did not see her injury from it; a scar upon her, from her
    maidenhead.")

This horrific revelation is built on a set of contrasts: the joyful spring season with Burāsp

and his daughter's misery; her earlier martial prowess with her helplessness before the cloud; the

meticulous visual detail of the princess's dress with the overwhelming obscurity of the storm that

envelops her; finally, the hidden nature of her injury with its severity. Neither the poet nor the

characters dwell on the loss of the girl's virginity, perhaps because the entire story of the cloud's

attack is described as a grotesque marriage ritual. As such, the stigma that attaches to her is

maybe less that of premarital sex and more uncertainty over the terrifying, formless entity that

has taken her as its bride. The penetrating darkness of this being is enough to terrify a *div*, its

depredations constituting a wonder (*shegefti*) that is not the visual marvel to which this word

usually applies but a complete opacity, a denial of comprehending access.

Borzin-e Āzar, to his credit, asks why this awful ritual is allowed to take place:

> *Bedu goft k-ay kārdideh hozhabr / gar u rā bebakhshi bedān tireh abr*
> *Begu tā ziyāni cheh dārad torā / choh patyāreh ārad beh pish-ash havā*
> *Chonin dād pāsokh keh yeksāl-e pish / ze ghomri nadādam bedu dokht-e khwish*
> *Ze kuh-e boland ātesh bar forukht / hameh chārpā-yam sarāsar besukht*
> *Man az howl-e ān ruz tarsideh-am / keh ān bim-patyāreh rā dideh-am*
> *Bebini to fardā o āgah shavi / agar khwishtan bar sar-e rah shavi*[246]

> (He said to him: O experienced lion, why do you give her over to that dark cloud?
> Speak of the pain that is yours, when the monster bears the weather before it
> He answered: One year ago, in my folly I did not give it my daughter
> From the high mountain, fire flared up, and burned all my livestock completely.
> I am afraid of the terror of that day, when I saw that monster of fear
> Tomorrow you will see, and become aware, if you take yourself along that path.)

In Borzin-e Āzar's question and Burāsp's reply, a vague entity begins to take shape

behind the dark cloud—a *patyāreh*, a malevolence, a monster.[247] Its fiery retaliation when not

granted its due hints at its true identity, but it testifies to Irānshāh's skill that he withholds this

reveal, letting the threat accumulate through inference. It's now clear why Burāsp was so eager

to offer his daughter, for no dowry[248] to whomever could defeat her and his champion wrestler:

the girl's intended will have to compete for her yet again, against an unknowable force that has

already claimed her as its own.

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[246] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 521-22.
[247] *Patyāreh* has strongly gendered connotations in modern Persian, indicating a "shrewish woman." However, this valence does not necessarily seem to be at work in classical texts. The eponymous monster of the *Dāstān-e Patyāreh*, discussed below (see pages 343, 352-353, and 356-358), does not display feminine characteristics, while the ogrish Gelimineh-Gush of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān*, regularly called a p*atyāreh* (see pages 344, including note 282, 354, and 356), is if anything gendered male. That said, the context of this passage does perhaps suggest a resonance between the monstrous creature and the unwed woman with whom it is intimately linked; in this, it may also recall the relationship between Haftvād's daughter and the *kerm* (see page 276).
[248] He explicitly states this in the preamble to the tournament (Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 516).

Shocked by this information, Borzin-e Āzar nevertheless arms for battle the next morning and assembles his warriors on the plain. The princess appears, perfumed and decked in gems.

Yeki tireh abri ham andar zamān / cho kuhi padid āmad az āsemān
Jahān tireh-gun gasht az ān tireh-abr / gherivān beh kerdār-e shir o hozhabr
Gerefteh jahān ātesh o dud-e uy / hami har zamān ātesh afruzad uy
Keshān dāman-ash bar zamin por ze chin / chu dudi keh khizad ze ru-ye zamin
Kharushān ze kuh andar āmad beh dasht / beh pirāmon-e u zamāni begasht
Beh gerd andar āmad-ash mānand-e dud / k-az-u simtan hich peydā nabud
Nehān kard o besyār faryād kard / zamāni hami bud bā dāgh o dard
Degar bāreh bar shod miyān-e havā / bepushid khurshid-e farmānravā[249]

(In that very instant, a dark cloud like a mountain appeared from the skies
The world became darkened from that dark cloud, roaring like a lion or panther
The world took on its fire and smoke; it kept sparking with flames constantly
It let its pleated robes trail to the earth, like smoke rising from the face of the earth
Roaring, it descended from the mountain to the plain; for a moment it twisted around her
It swept all around her like smoke, so that nothing could be seen of her silver body
She was hidden, and kept screaming; for a moment everything was burning and pain
Then again it lifted up into the air, and covered up the sovereign sun.)

The cloud's onslaught is as overwhelming as Burāsp has described it. Throughout the attack, it remains defiantly uncorporeal: a mass of smoke and flame that nonetheless suggests an immense robed figure. Rifling through the princess's clothes, it enacts a violation that is also a veiling, hiding its crime along with everything else when it blots out the sun. Borzin-e Āzar and two companions pursue the cloud back to its mountain. As the prince charges recklessly ahead, his retinue hang back. One of them, Tokhāreh, protests: *To bihudeh dar kuh tāzi hami / choh khwāhi keh bā abr bāzi hami / man in abr-e tireh choh dānam keh chi-st / chonin div bāshad keh nah ādami-st*[250] ("You keep galloping foolishly into the mountain, as if you wanted to contend with the cloud. How will I know what that dark cloud is? It could be a demon; it certainly isn't a

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[249] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 522-523.
[250] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 523.

human.") Tokhāreh's ontological doubts are perfectly reasonable. As other epics demonstrate, naming monsters is often a first step in confronting them; once forced to adhere to typology, they reveal a weakness to generic monster-slaying conventions. But the opaque cloud offers no such opening. Its miasmic form seems impossible to confront, let alone triumph over, while the tentative evocation of the *div* conjures up a figure of primordial horror. But the prince insists on continuing, leaving his companions to watch the trail for his return.

> *Hami rānd asb andar ān ghār-hā / fekandeh separ did kharvār-hā*
> *Sarāsar dareh sorkh o zard o siyāh / hami kard borzin bedān dar negāh*
> *Hami goft k-andar chonin jā-ye tang / do lashkar hamānā keh kardeh-st jang*
> *Yeki z-ān sepāh-ast bogrikhteh / ze har su beh khāk andar āmikhteh*
> *Betarsid borzin az ān howl-jāy / hami bud o benhād dar pish pāy*
> *Hami goft k-in az tan-e azhdahā-st / keh pish-e dam-ash jānevar bi bahā-st*
> *Keh in-ast ān abr bālā-ye man / ze posht-e zamin bogselad pā-ye man*[251]
>
> (He kept riding the horse into those caverns; he saw tons of shields scattered about
> The defile was completely red and yellow and black; Borzin kept gazing at it.
> He kept saying: In this narrow place, surely two armies have done battle;
> One of the forces has fled, and hidden amidst the dust in all directions.
> Borzin grew scared of that terror-place, but he remained and put his foot forward
> He was saying: These are from the *azhdahā*'s body, before whose breath any creature is
>   worthless
> For this is that cloud that was above me, that tore my feet from the earth's back.)

Here again, Irānshāh exhibits a masterful use of suspense. Borzin-e Āzar's attempt to understand the strange, half-lit scene builds from his misreading of the evidence through to his dread realization, which occurs in the onslaught of his fear (*betarsid*) a moment before the audience learns what he has figured out: the "shields" are in fact immense scales, the cloud is in fact an *azhdahā*, and he has strayed directly into its lair. And unlike his predecessors in past epics, boldly expressing their confidence that they can defeat whatever comes against them, the

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[251] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 524.

young hero here only recalls how he was recently overwhelmed by the creature's power. Then,

before he can offer a prayer or otherwise prepare, the monster is upon him.

Darin bud k-az kuh dar azhdahā / beghorrid o kard ātesh az dam rahā
Havā tār-tar gasht az kām-e uy / gerefteh zamin yeksar andām-e uy
Dahān-ash beh mānand-e ghāri farākh / cho almās bar sar mar u rā do shākh
Do chashm-ash beh kerdār-e do tās-e khun / sar-ash hamchonān chun koh-e bisotun
Ze sar tā be dom bud sad gaz fazun / del-e shir rā didan-e u zabun
Cho borzin chenān did yek na'reh zad / chonān k-az delirān gah-e kin sazad
Cho āvāz borzin-ash āmad beh gush / beh maghz andar-ash tiz-tar gasht hush
Bedid-ash berun tākht o āmad ze ghār / kamān rā beh zeh kard por-del sovār
Bepeyvast bar shast tir-e khadang / cho ān azhdahā andar āmad beh tang
Cho bā shast sufār shod zur yāz / neshast azhdahā rā beh dideh farāz
Ze partāb bar dideh āmad-ash rāst / ze dard azhdahā khwishtan kard kāst
Khadangi degar bāreh peyvand kard / chonān jānevar rā chonin band kard
Cho charm-e gavaznān resid-ash beh gush / to gofti k-az ān azhdahā raft hush
Zad-ash bar degar dideh o kard kur / ze dard do chashm-ash ze tan raft zur
Yeki azhdahā bar keshid az niyām / keh tāzi hami khwānad ān rā hosām
Khwāresh dād az khun o khun-khwār raft / hamāngah sar-ash rā ze tan bar gereft[252]

(At that moment, the *azhdahā* roared from within the mountain, and loosed fire from its
          breath
The air became black as its maw; the earth was taken up entirely with its limbs.
Its mouth gaping like a cavern; two horns on its head like diamond
Its two eyes like two bowls of blood; its head exactly like Mount Behistun
From head to tail, it was more than a hundred yards; the lion's heart became weak at the
          sight of it
When Borzin saw it, he let out a cry, fitting for brave ones at the moment of vengeance.
When Borzin's voice reached its ears, its mind grew harsher within its brain.
It saw him, rushed out and came from the cave; the full-hearted knight strung his bow
He hooked the poplar arrow on his thumb-ring, when that *azhdahā* drew near
When the nock was set firm on the thumb-ring, he aimed it to land in the *azhdahā*'s open
          eye
The shot landed right in its eye;[253] from pain, the *azhdahā* felt itself grow weak
He nocked another poplar-shaft, in order to subdue that creature
He struck its ear, which was like a stag's hide; you'd say that from that the *azhdahā* lost
          consciousness
He struck it in the other eye and made it blind; from the pain in its eyes, strength left its
          body
He drew an *azhdahā* from his sheathe, such as the Arabs usually call a "scimitar"
He fed it with blood and it became bloodthirsty; at once he took off its head from its
          body.)

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[252] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 524-525.
[253] This shot recalls Rostam's fatal wounding of Esfandiyār (Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, V, 412).

The actual combat, formulaic as it is, is perhaps the least interesting part of the story. The eldritch horror of the cloud resolves into a recognizable monster, which lends itself not only to description but to thorough measurement, both forms of legibility that presage its destruction. Borzin seems well-versed in *azhdahā* slaying, beginning with an arrow volley before finishing it off at close range. It may be worth noting that he aims for its eyes rather than its mouth, a choice perhaps poetically motivated by the emphasis on sight and darkness throughout the episode. A few tantalizing hints at the beast's consciousness do not build up into anything even approaching Rostam's talking Māzandarāni creature. But Irānshāh's deployment of *azhdahā* to mean "sword" in the duel's conclusion (a usage dating back at least to Ferdowsi) skillfully links together all the *azhdahā* of this narrative: the princess, the hero, the monster, and the instrument of violence, uniting them through the various forms of bloodshed that both delineate and blur their roles.

Following his victory, Borzin-e Āzar finds a spring, washes, and offers thanks to God. Hauling the *azhdahā*'s head back to his companions, he is showered with praise as they marvel at the monster's features (particularly its fangs, *dandān*). They bring the trophy back to Burāsp, who, after recovering from his fright, in turn praises God and Borzin-e Āzar. While the princess is presumably rescued, she is only given the briefest of retrospective mentions thereafter—at a celebration feast in Pārs, *Shab āmad shenid ān hameh sar-gozasht / az afkandan-e dokhtar o jang-e dasht / va-z-ān abr k-ān azhdahā gashteh bud / spahbod beh zāri vorā koshteh bud* ("Night came, and all listened to the tale: the overthrowing of the girl, the battle on the plain / and that cloud which that *azhdahā* had become; the commander killed it wretchedly"). Otherwise, there is only a reference to *kār-e 'arusi*, a wedding, in the letter the prince sends to an

ally.[254] From the moment she is enveloped in the cloud, the princess is effectively occulted, her agency lost in a storm of sexual violence. That the husband she chose is able to murder her rapist only further subsumes her identity. In this too, she fulfills her role as an *azhdahā*, a wondrous appearance doomed by narrative exigency.

The whole episode echoes the story of the *Shir-Kappi* in the *Shāhnāmeh*: the gorgeous spring setting, the imperiled princess, the monster lurking in the mountains whose attack is framed as a violation, the victorious Iranian champion. But it unfolds very differently. The narrative, like Burāsp's realm, is encompassed by a series of hidden truths and customs, each more unsettling than the last. At the heart of it all lies the figure of the *azhdahā.* This monster's sexual desire recalls Zahhāk's rapaciousness. But that king's human body provides a degree of anatomical plausibility to his lust. This ethereal creature is no sooner glimpsed than it diffuses— into the warlike natures of its victim and its killer, the blade that destroys it, clouds and rain, a looming sense of predatory corruption, and the girl's lingering scar.

The World Without Bahman

After a subsequent series of battles, Bahman abandons his vendetta against the Sistāni faction, and they are reconciled to the crown. The king then has a nightmare: *chenān didam ay pir-e farrokh beh khwāb / keh abri bar āmad seyah bā shetāb / yekāyek beh bālā-ye man istād / cho ātesh shod va ruy bar man nehād / biyāmad beh bālā-ye man bar forukht / marā hamchu angosht kard o besukht / pas az howl-e ān ātash-e por gazand / biyoftādam az takht injā nazhand* ("This I saw, noble old man, in my dream; that a cloud rose up, black and quick, / bit by bit it settled above me; it became like fire, and showed me its face; / it came and flared above me,

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[254] Irānshāh*, Bahmannāmeh*, 526-527.

made me like a finger and burned me; for fear of that biting fire, I fell here despondent from the throne.") The dream's meaning is explicit, the king is told: *shavad ruzgār-e to shāhā beh sar / beh dast-e yeki sahmgin jānevar / keh gur-e to bāshad ze giti nehān / nabinad neshān-at kas andar jahān*[255] ("Your fate, O king, will reach its end at the hands of a terrible creature; your tomb will be hidden from the earth; no one will see a trace of you in the world.") Shaken, Bahman turns over the throne to his daughter Homāy.[256] This dream eerily recalls the earlier circumstances of the princess's abduction, with the king replacing the warrior-woman; the interpretation of the black cloud as a threatening if still-vague creature (*jānevar*) closely echoes Borzin-e Āzar's conversation with Burāsp. With this prophecy, Irānshāh is able to begin a slow build of tension toward his poem's conclusion.

The payoff is delayed a few years, though these pass quickly. Then, while on a hunting expedition, Bahman is approached by a group of men who tell him of an affliction they have suffered for three years: *Beh gāh-e dorudan yeki azhdahā / biyāyad konad dasht-e mā bi-bahā / Besuzad hameh dasht z-ān sān beh dam / keh nah sabzeh mānad zamin rā nah nam / agar sāl-e digar hamin-ast o bas / namānad ze mā zendeh khwad hich kas*[257] ("Into the harvest fields, an *azhdahā* comes, and renders our plains worthless; / it burns all the plain like that with its breath, so that no greenery remains on the earth, nor moisture; / if the next year is like this, and that's all, then none of us will remain alive.") The former king immediately sets off towards the afflicted region, with Borzin-e Āzar among his retinue. After receiving directions to the monster's lair, Bahman offers great treasure to whichever of his warriors will track down the beast. Rostam-e Tur (an ally of the Sistāni faction, not to be confused with the now-long-dead Rostam) agrees;

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[255] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 592.
[256] Her commander-in-chief and counselor, interestingly, are both daughters of Rostam; Irānshāh here presents an striking tableau of feminine governance.
[257] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 596-597.

Bahman accompanies him with the army. Rostam-e Tur enters the valley, in a scene that mirrors

Borzin-e Āzar's earlier confrontation:

> *Dareh sar be-sar did sorkh o siyāh / betarsid o kard u ze har su negāh*
> *Bedānest k-ān azhdahā rā-st pust / hameh dasht o dar yeksareh jā-ye u-st*
> *Hami rānd tarsān bedān pahn dasht / zamāni dar ān marghzār-ash begasht*
> *Kharushi bar āvord chun ra'd-e tond / keh merrikh rā gasht z-ān hush kond*
> *Cho bar jā-ye khwish azhdahā ān shenid / sar az khāk bar-dāsht o u rā bedid*
> *Bejonbid donbāl rā jāy kard / beghorrid o āngāh tak pāy kard*
> *Cho rostam bedid ān seyah azhdahā / bedānest k-az-uy nayābad rahā*
> *'enān bar gerāyid o bar gasht az uy / gorizān su-ye lashkar āvord ruy*
> *Cho tang andar āmad bedān marzbān / zafar bāz kardeh keshideh zabān*
> *Dahān hamchu ghāri shekam hamchu kuh / del az didan-e u shodi por-sotuh*
> *Betarsid az ān howl-patyāreh sakht / bezad dast o bar shod beh shākh-e derakht*
> *Samand-ash gorizān bar shāh shod / hameh lashkar az kār-ash āgāh shod*[258]

(He saw the defile completely red and black; he became afraid, and looked in all
    directions
He knew that was the *azhdahā*'s skin; all that plain and valley were its place
He kept riding, afraid, into that wide plain; a while he passed through its prairie
He let out a roar like harsh thunder, that dulled the wits of Mars itself;
When the *azhdahā* heard that from its place, it lifted its head from the dust and saw him
It moved, made room for its tail; roared and then quickly got to its feet
When Rostam saw that black *azhdahā*, he knew he could not escape it
He shortened the reins and fled back from it; galloping, he turned his face towards the
    army
When it drew right up to that march-lord, gullet open and tongue stretched out,
Its mouth like a cavern, belly like a mountain; seeing it, hearts became full of woe
He feared that horror-monster terribly; struck out his hand and climbed onto a tree branch
His galloping bay reached the king; all the army became aware of what he'd done.)

There is an element of comedy in Rostam-e Tur's abject failure. His brave façade is

cracked from the start, with the admission that he is afraid (*tarsān*); his reaction to seeing the

monster is then a complete reversal of the usual heroic script. In a handful of lines, he goes from

bellowing like thunder to cowering in a tree, while his horse careers on into the army, presaging

the onslaught they are about to endure:

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[258] Irānshāh*, Bahmannāmeh*, 598-599.

Jahān-pahlavān chun samand-ash bedid / bezad dast o jāmeh beh tan bar dorrid
Bezad bāng bar lashkar o khwad betākht / ham az jāy gorz-e garān bar-farākht
Sad o shast bār az delirān hazār / hameh hamleh kardand bā shahryār
Dar oftād ān azhdahā dar miyān / tabah kard besyār az irānyān
Farāvān bekosht asb o mardom beh dam / parākandeh kard ān sepah rā ze ham[259]

(When the world-champion[260] saw his bay, he struck his hands and tore the clothes upon
        his body
He let out a shout upon the army, and himself galloped, while he lifted the heavy mace
        from its place
A hundred sixty of the thousand brave ones all attacked alongside the king
That *azhdahā* fell upon the midst of them; it destroyed many of the Iranians
With its breath, it killed multitudes of horses and men; it ripped that army apart.)

The havoc that the *azhdahā* is able to wreak upon Bahman's forces continues the streak

of unprecedented disaster. With Rostam-e Tur's flight, the entire encounter has veered wildly

away from familiar tropes, and the stakes of this departure are now becoming clear. Tur descends

from his tree, grateful for his survival; meanwhile,

Cho lashkar parākandeh shod gerd-e dasht / az ishān seyah azhdahā dar gozasht
Cho bar gasht o āmad beh nazdik-e shāh / hami kard dar shāh borzin negāh
Cho shāh-e jahān rā chonān dad bedid / yeki su-ye borzin-e yal bengarid
Beh borzin chonin goft k-ay nām-juy / beh mā dārad in howl patyāreh ruy
Cho shod razm-e in azhdahā nām o nang / konun man shavam pish yā to beh jang
Sazāvār-e in razm shāh-ast goft / keh bā u honar-hā-ye shāhi-st joft[261]

(When the army became scattered around the plain, the black *azhdahā* passed by them
When it returned and came towards the king, Borzin kept looking at the king
When the world-king saw that beast, he glanced towards Borzin the hero
He said this to Borzin: O fame-seeker! This terror-monster has turned towards me
Whether fighting this *azhdahā* be honor or shame, now I have gone before you into battle
The king is worthy of this fight, Borzin[262] said, for royal skills are a match for it.)

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[259] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 599.
[260] Various heroes of Sistān hold this title; in this passage, it refers to Borzin-e Āzar.
[261] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 599.
[262] Here, and in the rest of the translation for this scene, I have replaced some pronouns with full names for clarity.

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Honing in on the king, the *azhdahā* seems to possess an uncanny intelligence. The half-glimpsed presence from the king's nightmare begins to take shape before him. Bahman gets in a half-hearted jibe, pointing out to his champion that he himself has now taken the warrior's traditional place in the front of the battle-line. But Borzin calls his bluff—the king is worthy, or perhaps "deserving," of this fight (*sazāvār in razm-e shāh-ast*), since royal skills (*honar-hā-ye shāhi*) are a "match" (*joft*) for it. Beneath the lukewarm encouragement lies a condemnation: Borzin seems to suggest that Bahman's vicious acts as a king have now found their equal in the ferocious monster. The royal arts of subjugation and intimidation are made manifest in the *azhdahā*. Bahman seems to sense his former enemy's grim implication:

> *Bedu goft k-az to shenidam basi / keh bā azhdahā bar nayāyad kasi*
> *Yeki rā farāmarz koshteh-st o bas / yeki gord garshāsb-e faryād-ras*
> *Seh digar to koshti darin ruzgār / keh dar pārs rafti to ay nāmdār*
> *Beh shah goft k-ān azhdahā howl-tar / keh az tan niyā-ye to bobrid sar*
> *Jahān-juy goshtāsp-e razm-āzmāy / az ān razm dar rum begreft jāy*[263]

> (Bahman said to him: I've heard enough from you, for no one overcomes an *azhdahā*
> Farāmarz killed one, that's all; one, that hero Garshāsp of the war-cry[264]
> You killed a third in those days when you went to Pars, o famous one.
> Borzin said to the king: that *azhdahā* was more terrifying, which your grandfather
>   decapitated
> The world-seeking Goshtāsp, battle-tested, took his place in Rum due to that battle.)

This debate handily reviews some of the famous *azhdahā*-battles of times past. Bahman knows he isn't nearly as formidable as the champions he names, especially now that he is past his prime; at this same time, his invocation of Farāmarz (whom he had brutally executed) when asking the man's son for help seems to be a massive strategic error. Borzin-e Āzar's reply is suitably mocking—your ancestor Goshtāsp was able to kill an even more horrific beast; what can

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[263] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 600.
[264] Bahman is seemingly unaware of the details of this hero's biography, at least as Asadi-Tusi presents them; as discussed above, Garshāsp kills at least eight *azhdahā*.

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you do to make a name for yourself? By now, it is clear that the champion has no intention of

helping his sovereign. Revenge for his father is at hand, embodied in an implacable monster

closing in on the king—he has only to watch and wait.

> *Ze goftār-e u tang-del gasht shāh / bar afkand bar gostovān bar siyāh*
> *Bepushid tan rā beh kheftān-e jang / cho nazdik-e ān azhdahā gasht tang*
> *Biyandākht zubin-e zahr-ābgun / senān-ash beh khāk andar āmad negun*
> *Bezad yek dam ān azhdahā rā nahib / gosasteh shod-ash har do pāy az rakib*
> *Ze asb andar oftād khāvar khodāy / foru bord-ash ān azhdahā har do pāy*
> *Khorushid k-ay pahlavān zinhār / keh az man bar ārad ham aknun damār*
> *Chonin pāsokh āvard ān shir-mard / keh bā jān kheradmand bāzi nakard*[265]

> (From his speech, the king's heart became sore; he threw the caparison on his black
>   steed
> Put his war-gambeson on his body; when he came right up against that *azhdahā*,
> He threw a poison-drenched javelin; his spear went head-first into the dirt.
> He cried out at that *azhdahā* from fear; both his feet slipped from the stirrups.
> The lord of the east fell from the horse; that *azhdahā* swallowed both of his legs.
> He shouted: O champion, look out! For right now my breath is leaving me
> That lion-man gave this answer: A wise man does not play games with his soul.)

Here again, Bahman's ineptness is as comic as it is horrifying. Where past monster-

slayers exhibit consummate skill in riding and weapon-handling, the old king fails at both. The

azhdahā wastes no time in pouncing upon him. Thus begins an excruciating description of the

poem's titular character being devoured from the feet up, a sequence resembling nothing so

much as Quint's death in Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (albeit with considerably more dialogue and

fewer gouts of fake gore).[266] Even knowing that he is doomed, the king continues crying out for

Borzin-e Āzar's help; the champion's laconic reply is both an explanation for his inaction and a

condemnation of Bahman's past villainy. Rostam-e Tur now arrives on the scene, and is horrified

by what he sees:

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[265] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 600.
[266] Steven Spielberg, dir., *Jaws*; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1975.

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Bejushid rostam ze timār-e uy / bedu goft k-ay mehtar-e nāmjuy
Konam ham kanun shāh rā yāvari / chonin ruz bāyad marā kehtari
Baru bāng bar zad jahān pahlavān / keh to kineh dāri magar bar ravān
Gar u rā biyavbārad az tan dorost / marā khwashtar āyad keh gardi to sost
Az in bāreh-am dāstāni neku-st / keh doshman nagardad beh har hāl dust
Del-e doshman az kin nagardad tahi / gar-ash tāj-e shāhi beh sar bar nahi[267]

(Rostam seethed with grief; he said to Borzin: O fame-seeking chieftain,
Right now I will aid the king; this day, we will gain little
The world-champion shouted at him: Would you take vengeance against your own life?
If it swallows his body completely, I'll be happier than if you become injured
My reward from this is a fine story; for an enemy never becomes a friend after all
An enemy's heart is never emptied of vengeance, though you set a royal crown on his
        head.)

Knowing the king will not escape, Borzin here feels free to speak truthfully. He scorns

Rostam-e Tur's rebuke; after all, the *azhdahā* is enacting their vengeance upon the king. In

intervening, they risk not only injuring themselves but also being denied satisfaction. The "fine

story" (*dāstāni neku*) that Borzin sees as his due is one of justice served, but also of revenge kept

smoldering beneath a façade of friendship and loyalty.

Bezad azhdahā-ye dozham bāz dam / foru bord mar shāh rā tā shekam
Degar bāreh goft ay jahān-pahlavān / beh faryād-e man res keh dāri tavān
Az ān zāri-ye shāh o bāng-e khorush / honarmand rostam bar āmad beh jush
Beh yāri so-ye bahman āhang kard / bedu pahlavān-e jahān jang kard
'enān-ash gereft o foru dāsht-ash / va-z-ān razm yekbāreh bar gāsht-ash
Foru bord-ash ān azhdahā tā beh bar / ze beyrun namānd-ash bejoz dast o sar
Hami kard niru shah-e mostmand / k-az ān azhdahā u rahad bi gazand
Degar goft k-ay pahlav-e nikrāy / beh faryād-e man res ze bahr-e khodāy
Az ān zāri-ye shāh rostam vorā / hami khwāst raftan nakard-ash rahā
Degar bāreh ān azhdahā-ye damān / foru bord dast-ash ham andar zamān[268]

(The fierce *azhdahā* again drew breath; it swallowed the king up to his belly
Once again he said: O world champion! Come to my cry, if you are able!
From that wail of the king's and his roaring shout, the skillful Rostam began to seethe
He sought to aid Bahman; towards him, the champion of the world fought
He took his reins and held them down, and turned once again towards that fight
The *azhdahā* swallowed Bahman up to his chest; nothing of him remained outside but his

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[267] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 601.
[268] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 601-602.

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hands and head
The poor king kept exerting himself, that he might escape from that *azhdahā* unharmed
Again he said: O champion of good counsel! Come to my cry, for God's sake!
From that wail of the king, Rostam kept trying to go to him; he would not abandon him.
Again, that hissing *azhdahā* swallowed both his hands in an instant.)

The static nature of this scene heightens its horror. It proceeds at a nightmarish slog,

progressing only through the monster's successive gulps as Rostam tries and fails to reach the

king (exactly what impedes him is unclear—the terrain? The dead bodies of the army? His own

fear or ambivalence?) The dying Bahman has the heartbreaking illusion that he might escape

unharmed (*bi-gazand*), even as his body vanishes piece by piece into the creature's gullet. At

last, he seems to accept his fate:

> *Beh borzin-e yal bahman āvāz kard / keh man raftam ay nāmdār-e nabard*
> *Negah-dār tāj-e kiyān bar homāy / farāmosh makon pand-e ān rahnamāy*
> *Ze man bār dārad cho āyad padid / az u shahryāri no āyad padid*
> *Agar dokhtar ārad gar ārad pesar / beneh bar sar-ash zud tāj-e pedar*
> *Zamāneh sakhon dar dahān-ash shekast / beh kām-e chonān azhdahā dar neshast*
> *Foru khward-ash ān azhdahā-ye damān / zamāneh sar āmad bar u por ziyān*
> *Zeh ay bi-vafā ruzgār-e setam / nah shādi bemāni beh mardom nah gham*[269]

("To Borzin the hero, Bahman shouted out: I am gone, o famed one of battle
Look after the imperial crown for Homāy; do not forget to advise that leader.
She is bearing my heir; when he appears, from her a new king will have appeared
Whether she bears a girl or a boy, quickly put upon its head its father's crown
Fate broke the words in his mouth; he slipped into the maw of that *azhdahā*
That hissing *azhdahā* gulped him down; his time ended, full of misery
Well done, o faithless, oppressive destiny; you don't let men's happiness last, nor their
        sorrow.")

The king recaptures a measure of grace in these final seconds, no longer crying vainly for

help but rather clear-headedly organizing his affairs of state. Still, the poet is able to convey the

sudden shock of his death, as "fate broke the words in his mouth" (*zamāneh sakhon dar dahān-*

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[269] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 602.

ash shekast). Even the demise of an old and wicked king is a moment of breaking, with speech—*sakhon*, *logos*—wrenched away by fate. The ineffable force of *zamāneh* becomes gruesomely real here, embodied in the predatory monster and its destruction of embodiment. The authorial comment on "faithless, oppressive destiny" (*bi-vafā ruzgār-e setam*) echoes the laments that close the *Garshāspnāmeh*. But that epic maintains its proud heroic ethos to the last, with Garshāsp girding himself for one final battle against an implacable cosmic force, raging against the dying of the light. The *Bahmannāmeh* literalizes this moment and so reveals its ugly truth—no celestial *azhdahā* waiting just beyond the darkness, but a real reptile consuming a man while others look on, caught between duty, disgust, and glee.

Sara Kuehn speculates that Bahman's death "may however, just like the metaphor of being 'caught in the dragon's maw,' be a euphemism simply intended to indicate the fact that he perished."[270] It is hard, though, to imagine that anyone reading Irānshāh's text could accuse it of euphemism. To drive home the visceral horror of becoming-meat, the poet even provides a final, sickening detail: *Cho bahman shod az kām-e u nāpadid / beraft azhdahā tiz o lakhti david / Bekhoft o begholtid bar sang o khār / tarākātarāk āmad az shahryār / Hami ostokhwān-ash beh ham dar-shekast / shekasti keh hargez nashāyad-ash bast / Va-z-ān pas shod andar jahān nāpadid / beh giti kasi in shegefti nadid*[271] ("When Bahman disappeared into its maw, the *azhdahā* went off suddenly, and rushed off a little ways / Then lay down and slithered upon the rocks and thorns. A snapping-cracking came from the king / All his bones were shattering together, a breaking that could never be bound back / And then he vanished from this world; no one on earth had seen such a wonder.")

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[270] Kuehn, *Dragon,* 102.
[271] Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 602.

The entropic dissolution of the king's body provides a gruesome confirmation of the prophecy that Bahman's tomb would "be hidden from the earth" and all trace of him would disappear. As with the earlier cloud-*azhdahā*, the wonder (*shegefti*) here emerges not in an image but in a vanishing. This agent is not thwarted but annihilated: "What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved?... What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all?... who or what is the entity that has woven fate?... *Why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here when there should be something*?"

With this set of elliptical questions, Mark Fisher defines the "eerie," a quality of horror that he distinguishes from the "weird" while contrasting both with the Freudian *unheimlich*, the return of the repressed in distorted yet unmistakably familiar guise. By contrast, "the weird is that *which does not belong*." It "brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the "homely" (even as its negation)."[272]

The *azhdahā*—the incongruous element, the intruder from the sea or the exotic frontier or the lost past, bursting into the landscape of huntable beasts—seems to embody the disruptive character of the weird. Its affiliations shatter norms of gender and political hierarchy, while its hybrid array of body parts recalls the affinity that Fisher identifies between the weird and the technique of montage. Yet in its devouring guise, its cloud-form, its hidden celestial counterpart, the monster's effects are primarily "eerie." It de-centers the myth of heroic agency, revealing the "spectral and speculative world" that is the "world-without-us."[273] According to the standard script of the dragonslaying encounter, the *azhdahā* represents a tropological body upon which the

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[272] Mark Fisher, "INTRODUCTION: The Weird and the Eerie (Beyond the Unheimlich)," in *The Weird and the Eerie* (e-book) (Repeater Books: London, 2016),
[273] Thacker, *In the Dust,* 4.

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human champion can enact civilizing dominance. But as the *Garshāspnāmeh* suggests, such struggles are mere rehearsals for a final, unwinnable contest. And in cases such as the death of Bahman, the implacable *azhdahā* approaches Thacker's notion of the "demon," the "placeholder for some sort of non-human, malefic agency that acts against the human"[274] by instantiating the revelation that the world is not, in fact, "for us"; that we are mortal meat, easily broken by natural forces that far exceed our powers. At the same time, the *azhdahā*'s mythic emergence from Zahhāk's hybrid form, and the uncanny traces of this origin that persist in epic descriptions of it, position this "malefic agency" within the human body itself. In the *azhdahā*, the composite "Snake-Man" envisioned and shaped over three generations of Persian epic, the competing claims of monster theory and weird theory cohere into a writhing, self-contradictory, vital monstrous form.

Once the horrific spectacle is over, Borzin and Rostam assemble the scattered army. They tell them that such are the workings of fate; that the realm is secure with Homāy on the throne; and that the king's end was already prophesied, and so unavoidable. A few mourning rituals are described; the poem then closes with a meditation on how Bahman exemplifies the workings of fate. For all his deeds, "*Saranjām dar kām-e narr-azhdahā / bemānd o ze giti nayāmad rahā*" ("At the end, he remained within the maw of a male *azhdahā*, and did not escape from this world.") In this, he is not exceptional; Asadi-Tusi likewise emphasized humanity's inability to dodge the fate imposed by material existence. But Irānshāh's excruciating portrayal of a man being swallowed by a predatory beast renders this philosophical perspective with grotesque realism.

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[274] Thacker, *In the Dust,* 11.

Equally strange as Bahman's death is the *azhdahā*'s survival. While many oral versions of Bahman's death end with Borzin-e Āzar killing the beast, in the epic text it is left unharmed. Whether it will, as the townspeople suggest, ultimately depopulate their region, continuing its namesake's anti-human crusade, is never stated. By refusing to provide the cathartic closure of the creature's death, Irānshāh releases the *azhdahā* from the poetic past, from which it had never before been allowed to escape alive. It creeps into the temporal gap between the monster-infested then and the haunted now.

5. *Azhdahā-i* Afterlives: the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān*

Even as other types of *masnavi* began to compete with the heroic epic in *motaqāreb* meter, poets continued to compose works so congruent to the world and style of the *Shāhnāmeh* that they could be seamlessly incorporated into later editions of Ferdowsi's poem. One of these modular additions is the tale of the *babr-e bayān,* the monster that Rostam killed in his youth and turned into his famous impenetrable battle-suit. While the garment is mentioned in the *Shāhnāmeh*, Ferdowsi says nothing of its origin. Indeed, the earliest textual evidence of the full story that I have confirmed dates to the 19th century. Though hardly a poetic masterpiece, the surviving versions of this tale indicate the ongoing fascination that the *azhdahā* continued to hold within Persian popular literature. While drawing heavily on the tropological landscape that earlier writers had crafted for the monster, the composers of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* supplemented these intertextual links with inventive additions of their own. Among these, the depiction of the raging beast as a hybrid between the traditional *azhdahā* and a man-eating tiger may represent a response to early modern ecological history. Though it remained a creature tied

inextricably to the past, the *azhdahā*'s appearance in these narratives suggests its continued utility for modern imaginations.

Saghi Gazerani has catalogued four versions of the tale.[275] Two are versified *masnavi*s in classic epic *motaqāreb* meter: one in British Library manuscript Or. 2926, a *Shāhnāmeh* with many interpolations copied in Shiraz in the early 1830s; another represents the opening section of a lithographed *Farāmarznāmeh*, produced in Mumbai in 1907.[276] The other two are shorter prose summaries: one in Persian contained in *Haft Lashkar*, the Qājar-era *naqqāli*[277] scroll;[278] a second in German, related by the 19th century Orientalist Julius Heinrich Petermann from the narration of a priest of the Mandaeans in Sūq ash-Shuyūkh, Iraq.[279] Rezā Ghafuri adds another manuscript for the poem, *Noskheh-ye majles* 13493/86522, located at the *Ketābkhāneh-ye Majles-e Shurā-ye Eslāmi*,[280] in addition to highlighting a number of *naqqāli* recensions.

On the basis of the *Shahnameh Project*'s image database, Marjolijn van Zutphen has speculated that several other texts describing Rostam's battle with a monster in India exist; she links these with another interpolation, the *Dāstān-e Patyāreh*.[281] Of these manuscripts, one each is located in St. Petersburg, Tehran, and Lahore, and so not immediately accessible to me. However, my own investigations of *Dāstān-e Patyāreh* texts located at the Beinecke Library in New Haven suggest, as Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh suspected, that this tale is indeed closely connected to the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān*.

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[275] Gazerani, *Sistani Cycle,* 72.

[276] Rostam Pur Bahrām Sorush Tāfti, ed., *Farāmarznāmeh* (Bombay [Mumbai]: Matba'i-Fayzrasān, 1324 [1906]).

[277] *Naqqāli* is an oral storytelling art, whose practitioners traditionally combine snatches of epic verse with dramatic prose narration. The entire epic cycle could be related over a long series of performances.

[278] Mehrān Afshāri and Mahdi Madayeni, eds. *Haft Lashkar (Narrators' Comprehensive Scroll): From Kayūmars to Bahman* (Tehrān: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1998), 153-156.

[279] Julius Heinrich Petermann, *Reisen im Orient, Zweiter Band*, *Nebst Einer Karte* (Leipzig: Verlag von Veit & Comp., 1861), 107-109.

[280] Ghafuri, *Haft Manzumeh*, 224.

[281] van Zutphen, *Farāmarz,* 105.

<u>Tiger, Tiger</u>

The general outline of the narrative remains the same across all versions. The champions of Iran, including Zāl and his young son Rostam, are feasting at the royal court. Emissaries arrive from an Eastern ruler describing how a terrible monster is ravaging their country, and requesting aid from Iran. Zāl prepares to lead a force eastward, but Rostam announces that he should be sent to fight the beast instead. Outraged at his son's insolence, Zāl chastens Rostam, then sets off with his army. Rostam acquires a set of weapons, and sets out after Zāl. Under an assumed name (Alborz, in all three of the Persian versions), Rostam attacks his father's army, capturing many of their champions and demanding tribute. Zāl prepares to fight back, but before full-scale Oedipal conflict can erupt, they are interrupted by the arrival of a demon, (called *Gelimineh-Gush* (Carpet-Ears), in all the Persian versions[282]), who wreaks havoc on the army before being subdued by Rostam and pledging to serve him. In recognition of his saving the army, Zāl allows Rostam/Alborz to travel with him the rest of the way. Arriving at their destination, they meet with the eastern ruler, who leads them into the area devastated by the monster. After several days of stakeout, the beast re-emerges, causing Zāl, the local king, and the rest of the army to flee in panic. Rostam, however, stands his ground, and through a cunning stratagem, he overcomes and slays it. Following this victory, his true identity is revealed to his father, and the monster's body is skinned to create a coat of armor. The army returns to the local king's palace to celebrate, and Rostam is rewarded with marriage to a beautiful princess, who in due course bears him a son, Farāmarz.

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[282] Possibly a species related to or belonging to Ya'juj and Ma'juj, who are sometimes represented in the *'ajā'eb* tradition as possessing giant ears (e.g., BL Additional 7706, British Library).

The notion that Rostam wears the skin of a big cat into battle predates the *Shāhnāmeh*. A fragment of Sogdian narrative, perhaps ninth century, describes the hero fighting demons (*δyw*) while wearing a panther skin coat (*pwrδnk' crm nγwδnn*),[283] while the famous Sogdian murals seem to depict him in a garment of black spots on gold. Similar robes, called *palangineh*, appear in the *Shāhnāmeh*, representing both the skins worn by Gayomart's followers in ancient times and, seemingly, the *babr-e bayān* itself. The meaning of *bayān* is a matter of debate. For Ferdowsi and his successors, it was used mostly in compound with *babr*; usually to denote Rostam's armor, and otherwise to describe vicious wild animals. In these cases, the adjective seems to have been understood roughly as a synonym for words such as *zhiyān*, *sotorg*, or *dozham* ("fierce, wild, raging," often with an added implication of immense size). Etymologically, though, there is little support for this, with proposals instead ranging from a connection to divinity or royalty (from the Old Iranian root *baga-*), to the act of fastening a belt, a feeling of terror (cf. *bim*, "fright"), or an Indian town (perhaps Bayana in Rajasthan).[284] While *babr* is seemingly more straightforward, there have been suggestions that it in fact means "beaver": this argument, which relies on a fabricated relationship between Rostam and the Iranian water goddess Anāhita,[285] can be safely disregarded. For Rostam, Sara Kuehn writes, the act of wearing the monster's skin "implicitly signaled his symbolic appropriation of the dragon's qualities as well as his mastery over the hybrid creature."[286] It makes this most complex of the *Shāhnāmeh*'s heroes a consummate *azhdahā*, marked visually as a half-wild avatar of violence.

[283] Nicholas Sims-Williams, "The Sogdian Fragments of the British Library," in *Indo-Iranian Journal* 18, no. 1/2 (June/July 1976): 55-57.
[284] Rezā Ghafuri summarizes these proposals (Ghafuri, *Haft Manzumeh*, 208-209.
[285] Omidsalar. "The Beast," 129-142.
[286] Kuehn, *Dragon,* 79.

In the versified text of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān*, the tradition of the monster as a tiger is combined with the epic tropes and qualities of the *azhdahā*, resulting in an explicitly chimeric beast. The poems first introduce the monster through the trope of the supplicant's request. A messenger arrives from India, announcing:

> *keh shāhā ze gham mā beh shakk andar-im / abā azhdahā mā beh jang andar-im*
> *beh hendustān babri āmad padid / nadideh zamāneh nah dowrān nashenid*
> *derāzi o pahnā-ye u sad kamand / bovad bishtar ay shah-e arjomand*
> *nafas chun ze hāmun bar ārad beh tāb / berun āvarad māhi az qahr-e āb*
> *agar su-ye daryā nahad pā darun / konad az nafas āb-e daryā choh khun*
> *su-ye marghzāri keh ārad gozar / besuzad ze dud-e dahān khoshk o tar*
> *khwarad āhan o ruy o mes jomleh pāk / hamāngah betāzad su-y sang o khāk*[287]

> ("O King, from grief we are sunk in doubt; we are sunk in battle with an *azhdahā*
> A tiger has appeared in India, such as the time has not seen nor the era heard
> Its length and breadth are a hundred lassoes, perhaps more, o noble King!
> When it draws in its burning breath from dry land, it draws out fish from the water's
>   darkness
> If it sets its foot towards the sea, its breath makes the seawater like blood
> If it passes through the prairies, the smoke of its breath burns the dry and the wet
> It eats iron and brass and copper right up, even as it gallops over stone and dirt.")

From the beginning, the issue of killing the beast is tangled up with matters of warrior honor. There is far less concern over the danger that the monster presents than over who will gain the glory of destroying it. The conflict between Zāl and Rostam is based upon this question of heroic precedence, and takes center stage for much of the poem's middle portion. Only towards the end, after the expedition finally reaches India, does the titular creature regain some importance. In this choice of emphasis, the poem's composers gesture towards their audience's thorough familiarity with epic tropes. Assuming that the champions of Iran will eventually triumph against the monster, they are able to focus their attention on other conflicts.

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[287] BL MS Or. 2926, British Library, 112b.

Beraftand jā-i keh ān babr bud / khorushān o jushān chun abr bud
Bedidand dashti por ātesh-kadeh / tar-e khoshk rā jomleh ātesh zadeh
Beporsid dastān-e farrokh ze rāy / keh ay por-honar mard bā farr o jāy
Cherā ātesh-e tiz afrukhtand / ze bahr-e cheh in dasht rā sukhtand
Begoftā bedān ay yal-e shir-mard / kas az ādami ātesh injā nakard
Dam-e babr z-ān-guneh ātesh-zan-ast / keh dud-ash choh rokhsār-e ahriman ast[288]

("They went to the place where that tiger was; it was roaring and seething like a cloud
They saw the plain full of fire-temples; wet land and dry, all was fire-struck
The glorious Dastān asked the Rai: O skillful man, with royal aura and stature,
Why have they sparked harsh fire? For what reason have they burned this plain?
That other replied: O heroic lion-man, no human has made a fire here;
The tiger's breath is flammable in this way, that its smoke is like Ahriman's face.")

A week goes by while the army waits for the monster's appearance. During this time, the lithograph's Rostam sets to work on a device.

Valiken beh yek hafteh alborz mard / yeki khāneh-i āhani sāz kard
Derāzi o pahnā-ye u sad kamand / befarmud tā sākhtand arjomand
Hameh khanjar-e āb-dādeh beh zahr / neshānd andar ān pahlav-e por honar
Kenār-ash hameh khanjar-e jān-satān / neshānd ānchonān pahlavān-e jahān
Miyān-ash yeki khāneh az bahr-e khwod / befarmud kardand chonin keh bod[289]

("But in one week, the man Alborz had an iron house built
Its length and breadth a hundred lassoes; the noble man ordered them to build it
The skillful champion set daggers dipped in poison all around it
The world-champion set life-stealing daggers all over its sides
In the middle, he commanded them to make a house for his own sake, such as it was.")

In the manuscript, Zāl assembles his commanders to seek a *chāreh*, a stratagem that will help them overcome the beast. The Rai, however, is skeptical of their efforts: "*keh in azhdahā-peykar-e bad-neshān / nemindishad az tigh o gorz o senān / chu az kām ātesh-feshāni konad /*

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[288] Or. 2926, 115a.
[289] *Farāmarznāmeh*, 20.

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keh yārad bar-ash pahlavāni konad"[290] ("For this wicked dragon-bodied one doesn't worry

about blades or maces or lances / when it spurts flame from its maw, what does it avail to act

heroically against it?") The description of the *babr* as *azhdahā-peykar*, "dragon-bodied," recalls

similarly attenuated formulations in the *Shāhnāmeh*, emphasizing a hybrid monstrosity that

overspills single words and demands compound signifiers.

Just on cue, "...*nāgah bejonbid daryā ze jāy / delirān ze āvāz-e babr-e bayān / sarāsimeh*

gashtand o tireh-ravān ("Suddenly the sea began to move from its place; / from the voice of the

ferocious tiger, brave ones became bewildered and dark-minded.")

> *Cho babr āyad az āb-e daryā beh dar / so-ye lashkar āmad dahān por-sharar*
> *Ze pas ātesh afrukht u az dahān / dar-e dasht shod z-ātesh-e u nehān*
> *Shod āteshkadeh dasht o sahrā o kuh / ramidand lashkar az u dar sotuh*
> *Nabod zahreh kas rā keh āyad beh pish / gereftand har kas hami rāh-e khwish*
> *Selāh az kaf andākht lashkar tamām / nakardand yeki-sh dar anjā maqām*
>
> (When the tiger come out from the sea waters, it came towards the army, mouth full of
>   sparks
> In its wake, fire blazed from its mouth; the plain's passage became hidden by its fire
> Plain and desert and mountain became fire-temples; the army fled it in terror
> No one had the courage to come forward; everyone took his own path
> Weapons fell from fists throughout the army; no one of them took a stand there.)

This image of the landscape engulfed by fire does not seem drawn from *azhdahā* scenes

in the *Shāhnāmeh, Garshāspnāmeh,* or *Bahmannāmeh.* It grants to the animal a degree of

environmental devastation ordinarily reserved for humans, with this anthropic agency perhaps

suggested by the comparison of the scorched earth to *āteshkadeh*, "fire temples." As the monster

advances, even the usually heroic Zāl flees, and Rostam is left with his tutor Gudarz to face it. In

the manuscript, here, a strange hiatus happens; Rostam and Gudarz somehow have the time to

come up with and implement the strategy that eluded Zāl:

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[290] Or. 2926, 115a.

Beh fekr andar āmad gav-e piltan / keh chun jang sāzad abā ahreman
Chonin goft gudarz-e farkhondeh-rāy / keh ay por honar pahlav-e nik-rāy
Sazad gar biyārand chand gāv-e mish / beh āhag shekamshān biyākand bish
Sar-e rāh-e babr-e bayān bar nehand / beh dam dar keshad chashm bar ham nehand
Sepādar vo alborz āhag basi / ze mish o boz o gāv dah bār si
Shekamshān por az āhag o sang kard / mar ān rah beh babr-e bayān tang kard[291]

(The elephant-bodied hero began wondering how to wage war against Ahriman
This is what the auspicious-minded Gudarz said: O skillful, fair-minded champion!
It would be fitting it some water-buffaloes were brought, and their stomachs filled with
  plenty of quicklime
Have them placed on the route of the Raging Tiger; it'll suck them down, then they will
  shut its eyes
The commander and Alborz with much quicklime, and ten times thirty sheep and goats
  and cows
Filled their bellies with quicklime and stones, then placed them close by the path of the
  Raging Tiger.)

In the lithograph, the iron house has already been built, and Rostam is prepared for the

creature's attack:

Cho babr andar āmad dar ān razm-gāh / basi khward sāz o salih-e sepāh
Beh su-ye tahamtan ravān gasht tang / tahamtan bar āshoft hamchun nahang
Kamān rā beh qerbān gerefteh beh dast / bar āvard tireh beh zeh bar neshast
Seh chub-e khadang az kamān pey ze pey / bezad bar sar-e babr ān nāzakey
V-az-ān tir nāmad morād-ash beh mosht / bedin-sān keh shod tir u rā nakosht
Forud āmad az bāregi div-band / dar khāneh-ye āhanin bar fekand
Su-ye khāneh shod babr-e ātesh-feshān / keshid az nafas khāneh rā khwod koshān
Dam āvard ān khāneh rā khwod keshid / darun tā shod-ash halq bar ham darid
Chap o rāst bar halq-e u tigh-e tiz / neshast o nabud-ash degar khwod setiz
Dahān hamchu ghāri shod az ham farākh / chehā dāshti andar ān sang-lākh
Tahamtan kamān rā bar ārandeh kard / sad o shast tir-ash gozārandeh kard
Kaf-ash ātesh tir rā jomleh sukht / chonān-ash chap o rāst bar ham bedukht
Biyoftād bar khāk o zār o nazhand / bar u shod ze khāneh gav-e div-band
Biyafshord bāzu o shamshir-e tiz / zad-ash bar shekam chand zakhm-e setiz
Bar āmad davān babr-e ātesh-feshān / abar su-ye daryā hami shod ravān
Cho alborz did-ash ze gham yār gasht / beh khwod goft kam ranj bar bād gasht
Ze fetrāk bogshād pichān kamand / ze jā jost o dar gardan-e u fekand
Qadamgāh rā bar zamin kard sakht / beh zur-e khodāvand-e dādār-e bakht
Ze daryā pas u ruy bar gāsht-ash / beh gorz-e garān bāzu afrāsht-ash

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[291] Or. 2926, 115b.

Choh dāsht jān-ash bar āmad ze tan / beh zin andar āmad gav-e piltan[292]

(When the tiger descended into that battleground, it ate much of the army's gear and
        arms
Running, it drew close to the mighty-bodied one; the mighty-bodied roused himself like a
        leviathan
He took his bow from his bow-case in hand; drew an arrow and set it to the string
Three poplar shafts, one after the next, he shot at the head of that tiger, the impure one
But those arrows didn't reach their target; the arrows flew off and didn't kill it
The demon-binder descended from his steed, and threw himself into the iron house
The fire-scattering tiger went towards the house; drew in the house with its breath, killing
        itself
Its breath brought that house sliding into it, inside until its throat was torn apart
Left and right in its throat the sharp blades set, and it was fearsome no more
Its mouth split open like a cavern, such as there where in that stony place
The mighty-bodied one brought forth his bow, and loosed a hundred sixty arrows
Its spittle burned the arrows completely; some sewed its left and right together
It fell to the dust from pain and weakness; the demon-binding hero went from the house
        upon it
He pressed with his arms, and struck several harsh wounds on its belly with his sharp
        sword
The fire-scattering tiger came up running, and kept going on towards the sea
When Alborz saw this, he became upset; he said to himself: a little effort gets carried off
        by the wind
From the saddle-straps he loosened his looping lasso, moved out and cast around its neck
He kept his foothold firm upon the earth, through the strength of the justice-dispensing
        Lord
Then it turned back from the sea; he brandished the heavy mace in his arms
When it hit, its soul left its body; the elephant-bodied hero mounted up.")

In the manuscript, however, the battle is considerably shorter:

Beh su-ye tahmtan ravān gasht babr / tahamtan bar āshoft chun shod abr
Beshod su-ye ān gusfandān o gāv / beh dam dar keshid o nayāmad-ash tāv
Choh yek lahzeh bogzasht del sukht-ash / hami ātesh az kām afrukht-ash
Bezad bar zamin hamejā bā sar-ash / keh tā jān-e nāpāk shod az bar-ash
Bezad bar sar-ash chand gorz-e degar / jodā kard-ash az-ash hamāngāh sar[293]

(Towards the massive-bodied one the tiger went running; the massive-bodied stirred as
        if he'd become a cloud
It went towards those sheep and cows; it sucked them down in one breath, but gained no
        strength

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[292] *Farāmarznāmeh*, 21-22.
[293] Or. 2926, 115b.

When a moment had passed, its heart burned; it kept sparking fire from its maw
It struck the earth everywhere with its head, until its impure soul left its chest
He struck it on the head some more with his mace; right then he separated it from its
     head.)

The narratives reconverge afterwards, particularly in the creation of the eponymous armor. The manuscript says of the Iranian forces: *keh dar kandan-e pust-ash tākhtand / az ān pust perāhani sākhtand / keh babr-e bayān-ash pish jowshan ast / neshāni keh bā piltan rowshan ast*[294] ("They rushed to flay its skin, and created a shirt from that skin; for thereafter the *babr-e bayān* was a suit of armor, a clear symbol of the elephant-bodied one.") The lithograph uses very similar terms, but with a slightly different emphasis--"*keh kandand pust-ash hami tāftand / ze bahr-ash yeki jowshani sākhtand / jahāni az ān piltan rowshan ast / keh babr-e bayān-ash hami jowshan ast*[295] ("All dashed to flay its skin, and for him they created a coat of armor; / the world became bright from the elephant-bodied one, for the *babr-e bayān* is always his armor.")

Variation and Influence

As this summary implies, the verse recensions outlined above vary in a few key plot details. The prose versions display a similar range of variation, hewing generally close to the basic narrative but occasionally diverging. Perhaps the greatest difference lies in the specifics of killing the monster. Petermann's reported version, the *tumār*, and the lithograph all feature the construction of an iron house covered in blades, in which Rostam conceals himself. The monster swallows the house, lacerating its throat, before Rostam bursts out, lassoes the monster as it flees back towards the sea, and delivers the *coup-de-grace*. In the *tumār* and lithograph versions, this stratagem seems to be Rostam's idea alone; in Petermann's, it is suggested to him by his

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[294] British Library MS Or. 2926, f. 116a.
[295] Farāmarznāmeh, p. 24.

demonic servant. By contrast, the manuscript has Gudarz providing Rostam with a plan of filling animal hides with quicklime and having the *azhdahā* swallow them.

Both of these methods are familiar from the *Shāhnāmeh* examples discussed above—the bladed house (or box) from Esfandyār's *haft khwān*, the substance-filled hides from Eskandar's adventures. They rely on the intuitive notion that an animal with an impenetrable hide must be defeated from the inside-out; other Iranian epic heroes, including Farāmarz, Borzu pur-e Sohrāb, and Ardashir-e Papagān, similarly rely on their beastly foe's voraciousness in order to plant something deadly in its throat or stomach. The *Dāstān-e Patyāreh* also features a battle scene virtually identical to that in the lithograph, reinforcing the connection between these tales.

A few other significant differences bear mentioning. The *tumār* is the only version set during the reign of Nowzar, as opposed to Manuchehr; it is also the only version which leaves out an extended early sequence in which Zāl sends the upstart Rostam for further instruction and physical punishment at the hands of his tutor – identified as Gudarz in the two *masnavi*s, and simply as *Lehrer* in Petermann's text. When the tutor attempts to discipline his charge, Rostam instead beats him severely and escapes, heading to either an ancestral armory (in the *masnavi*s) or a nearby mountaintop (in Petermann) to acquire his grandfather's battle-gear.

The *tumār* and manuscript also leave out the interesting psychological nuance that the other two versions give Zāl during his disguised son's battle with the beast. In Petermann, Zāl prays that the hero will be devoured, so that he won't have to reward him; *als ihm aber Rustem's Lehrer entdeckte, dass dieser sein Sohn sei, nahm er sein Gebet zurück, und flehte um dessen Rettung* ("but when Rustem's teacher revealed to him that he was his son, he withdrew his prayer and begged for his salvation.") In the lithograph, Zāl first laments, believing Alborz has been killed; then praises him when he learns he has succeeded; then, upon seeing him, continues

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praising him outwardly while wishing in his heart that Alborz had died, since now he will have to be rewarded, and the defeats he inflicted on Zāl's army will be remembered; only then does Gelimineh-Gush reveal Rostam's identity, and Zāl abandons his unintentionally filicidal plans.

Most interesting for the purposes of this chapter is the monster's identity. Three of the versions identify it as both a tiger (*babr*) and an *azhdahā*, with only Petermann referring to it simply as *Drachen* throughout. In all accounts it is a ravenous, fire-breathing creature, dwelling in the East. The Persian versions all make it an amphibious monster, hiding in the water (*daryā*) but attacking its prey on land; they also insist on its size—one *farsang* in length and height according to the *tumār*, one hundred *kamand* in length and breadth according to the *masnavi*s. Intriguingly, while none of the firmly identified sources contain illustrations of the story, the two images still available on the Shahnameh Project's online database that van Zutphen cites as possible further exemplars of the related *Dāstān-e Patyāreh* both depict Rostam fighting beasts that combine typical features of reptilian monsters and tigers. This is further evidence that these illustrations are in some way connected to the *babr-e bayān*, in addition to or besides the *patyāreh* (which is not given similarly hybrid features). The illustration in St Petersburg Dorn 333 shows a bladed iron box, the device used in three of the extant versions to kill the monster; that in Tehran Golestān MS 943 show Rostam assailing it with arrows.

Why is this beast depicted as a hybrid? Rostam's coat is called the *babr-e bayān* several times in the *Shāhnāmeh*, and from a fairly early point is depicted as tiger-striped in miniatures; the *dāstān* as a whole almost certainly exists to gloss this reference and to provide a suitably dramatic birth story for the popular hero Farāmarz. Tigers are relatively rare in Persian epic texts, where lions and wolves feature more frequently as heroes' adversaries. The most famous tiger-fight in the classical corpus occurs early in the prose *Abumoslemnāmeh*, in which the

champion begins his career by destroying a giant tiger in a grove near his hometown. Perhaps the storytellers deemed a mere tiger too unimpressive a foe for the youthful Rostam; by making it a gigantic, firebreathing chimera, they were able to satisfy the demands of both etymology and drama. Additionally, the amalgamation of monstrous traits in a single beast serves to accentuate the divide between the hero and his nemesis. Perhaps we can see, in the contrast between the barbaric but ultimately tamable Gelimineh-Gush and the unreasoning savagery of the *babr-e bayān*, a realignment from the primordial struggles of the *Shāhnāmeh*, in which the battle lines of human, *div*, and tiger are drawn differently. Some monsters, it seems, can be domesticated; some cannot.

Despite the defiantly anti-human aspects of the monster, there are still signs that the composers of the story sought to continue the tradition of aligning heroes with their foes. Comparisons of warriors to tigers are relatively rare in epic diction—note, in the battle descriptions above, the preponderance of leonine and elephantine comparisons and the absence of *babr*-based metaphor. But in the manuscript, Zāl is compared to a *babr* when he faces off against Rostam outside the army camp.[296] Insofar as the poem plays with its audience's awareness of the *Shāhnāmeh*'s Oedipal conflicts, this alignment of the hero's father with his enemy further highlights the theme of intergenerational tension.

Hunting the Ur-Text

What might be speculated regarding the origin of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān*? Both the thorough correspondence of the four versions examined and the lack of a clear grouping structure among them are highly suggestive. No one text is particularly eccentric compared to the other

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[296] Or. 2926, 113b.

three; each one is an outlier in one detail or another, but by and large hews closely, sometimes extremely closely, to the others. These similarities come to the fore in the two *masnavi* texts. While very few lines are completely identical between the two, a considerable number are very similar—too many, certainly, for these to be independent versifications of the same story. The 1906 text is clearly not a copy of the earlier manuscript; yet they are undoubtedly related.

These intertwined relationships make it difficult to establish a primary version of the story. The diction is standard for Persian secondary epic. While they do cover an impressive geographical range, from southern Iraq to Shiraz to Bombay, all four witnesses that I have looked at date to the eight decades between the 1830s and 1907; all but one of van Zutphen's other prospective sources are also 19th century.[297] Evidence for medieval awareness of the story is also lacking. The *Borhān-e Qāte'*, a Persian dictionary completed in 1651, includes a fascinating definition for *babr-e bayān*:

> *hamān jibeh-jāmeh ast keh rostam ruz-hā-ye jang mi pushideh ast; va ba'zi guyand keh ān az pust-e akvān-e div budeh va beh e'teqād-e ba'zi ān ast keh ān rā beh jehat-e rostam az behesht āvordeh budand; va ba'zi digar guyand jānevari-st doshman-e shir o shir-e sharzeh hamān ast, u rā rostam andar kuh-hā-ye shām kosht, va pust-e ān rā jibeh-jāmeh sākht. Khāssiyat-ash ān ast keh dar ātesh nasuzad va dar āb gharq nashavad va hich harbeh bar ān kār nakonad; va guyand vaqti dar zamān-e anushirvān ān jānevar beh ham resideh bud hezār sovār rā bekoshtan u ferestādand ān jānevar dar miyān-e ān jamā'at oftādeh hameh rā majruh sākht va kosht va khward – va dibā-ye monaqqash-e rumi rā niz gofteh-and keh har sā'at beh rangi namāyad.*[298]
> (It is that same armor-coat that Rostam would wear on days of battle; and some say that it was from the skin of the Akvan Div, and according to the belief of some, it was that which was brought for Rostam from heaven; and some others say that it is a creature which is the enemy of the lion, and is the same as the "fierce lion." Rostam killed it in the mountains of Syria, and made an armor coat from its skin. Its special quality is that it does not burn in fire nor become sunk in water, and no weapon can do anything against it; and they say that once in the era of Anushirvān, this creature appeared. A thousand

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[297] Van Zutphen's other prospective manuscripts are from 1836 (Tehran Golestan); "second quarter of 19th century" (Lahore); 1651 (St. Petersburg);

[298] Mohammad Hosayn ebn-e Khalaf Tabrizi, *Borhān-e Qāte'*, ed. Mohammad Mo'in (Tehrān: 1330 [1951]), 231-232.

knights were sent to kill it; that creature fell upon the midst of that assembly and injured and killed and ate them all—and they also call an ornate Western brocade this, which shows a different color every hour.)

This suggests a variety of possible origins for Rostam's armor; but only one of them resembles the existing *Dāstān*, and only remotely—the surviving narratives make no connection to the "fierce lion" (*shir-e sharzeh*) and take place not in the Syrian mountains but on an Indian coastline or floodplain. Nothing here suggests that anything resembling the extant versions of the tale was available to the dictionary's learned compiler in the mid-seventeenth century.

The existence of the *Dāstān-e Patyāreh* further confuses the issue. It seems overall like an alternate version of the same story, included by the compiler of Or. 2926 alongside his account of the *babr-e bayān*. Alternately, these may indeed have been two distinct tales that later narrators fused, borrowing the monster-killing chamber from the second tale, and perhaps the term *patyāreh* as well—though in the *babr-e bayan* text, the *patyāreh* is Gelimineh-Gush, the ultimately helpful demon sidekick. If they were always two entirely different narratives, though, it's hard to see what the purpose of the *Dāstān-e Patyāreh* is. In killing the *babr-e bayān*, Rostam gains both his signature battle-gear and one of his most illustrious offspring, Farāmarz; the *patyāreh* merely adds one more monster to his over-stuffed resume.

A hint lies in the pair of *Patyāreh* manuscripts at the Beinecke Library. Both of these link the slaying of the *patyāreh* to the birth of Farāmarz, which provides a central *raison d'être* for these tales; and one, crucially, states that the *babr-e bayān* was made from the hide of the *patyāreh*: "*Az ān jowshani sākht shir-e zhiyān / nahād-ash vorā nām babr-e bayān / keh az āb o ātesh nadidi gazand / chu pushidi ān pahlavān-e arjomand*"[299] ("From it, the roaring lion made a

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[299] Persian MSS +91, Beinecke Library, New Haven, CT., 65r (mislabeled as 66r).

suit of armor, and placed upon it the name: *babr-e bayān* [ferocious? tiger] / for it saw no

damage from water nor fire, when that noble champion wore it.")

Given the seemingly greater number of witnesses (and perhaps slightly older

appearances) of the *Dāstān-e Patyāreh*, we might imagine a scenario whereby a *Dāstān-e*

Patyāreh was composed to provide a conception story for the popular figure of Farāmarz. Some

enterprising narrators saw in this likewise an opportunity to provide an origin for Rostam's

famous battle-gear, which existing tales (such as that referenced in the *Borhān-e Qāte'*) already

linked to that hero's victory over a monster in a far-off land. Subsequently, other storytellers

sought to heighten and enliven the rather flat narrative of the *Dāstān-e Patyāreh* with the

interpersonal and Oedipal conflicts of what became the separate *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān*.

For Rezā Ghafuri, the antiquity of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān*'s narrative is proven by its

adherence to the archetypal "Indo-European" dragon-myth. Unlike so many other *azhdahā*

battles in Persian literature, it ends with the hero marrying a princess. The fact that the

relationship of dragon to princess is obscured—the former does not directly threaten or kidnap

the latter—allows Ghafuri to posit the existence of an even older version, in which the myth may

have been more perfectly represented. While this urtext is lost, its imagined outlines mean that

"*mi tavān goft keh revāyat-e nabard-e rostam bā babr-e bayān dar shomār-e chand revāyat-e*

kohan o pishineh-dāri ast keh beh dast-e mā resideh-ast" ("it can be said that the narrative of

Rostam's battle with the *babr-e bayān* numbers among the few ancient and primordial narratives

that have come down to us.") Regarding the date of the *masnavi* version itself, he writes: *beh*

dalil-e barkhi vizhegi-hā-ye zabāni-ye kohan, kami-ye vāzhegān-e 'arabi va tasir-nāpaziri az

'anāser-e sāmi, ehtemāl dārad in manzumeh mote'alleq beh avākher-e qarn-e panjom yā aghāz-

e qarn-e sheshom bāshad[300] ("due to some characteristics of ancient language, few Arabic words, and the lack of impact of Semitic elements, it is probable that this poem belongs to the end of the fifth century or the beginning of the sixth century [the early- to mid-twelfth century CE]").

Ghafuri's reasoning relies on the problematic assumption that adherence to a postulated ancient myth proves antiquity. His linguistic arguments are further undermined by the abundant evidence that storytellers and performers composed epic verse in archaic diction that closely imitated that of the *Shāhnāmeh*, in order to link separate *dāstān*s or elaborate on particular passages; Marjolijn van Zutphen has demonstrated that this practice persisted as late as the early twentieth century.[301] In contrast to Ghafuri's claims, there seems to be a good chance that neither the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* nor the *Dāstān-e Patyāreh* is particularly old. Their late manuscript tradition, and absence from early attempts at comprehensive *Shāhnāmeh* collations (such as the immense 1433 Bāysonghori edition) suggest that they were not extant during the medieval period. They likely stem not from the first flush of secondary epic, in the centuries immediately after the completion of the *Shāhnāmeh*, but from a later era in which anonymous poets composed material to fill in gaps in heroic biographies, or weave together disparate portions of texts into single narratives. Lacking an authoritative text, these compositions could and did vary enormously. However, widespread borrowing and dissemination, to say nothing of heavily formulaic nature of the verse itself, would also corrall variants to a certain extent. The Safavid-era coffeehouse in which the art of *naqqāli* developed is a prime candidate for the environment in which the multiform *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* may have appeared. Kumiko Yamamoto asserts that narrative temporal markers, such as *nāgāh*(/*nāgah*), *tā, āngāh*(/*āngah*), and *sepas,* are rare to

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[300] Ghafuri, *Haft Manzumeh*, 221-222.
[301] Van Zutphen, *Farāmarz*, 320.

nonexistent in the *Shāhnāmeh* but a frequent feature of *naqqāli* narration.[302] If this is so, their presence in the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* may be further proof of its origins in an oral milieu. In the brief manuscript, *nāgah* appears 4 times; temporal *tā*, twice; *āngah* thirteen times, often in combination with *pas*.

The choice to depict the *babr* as a raging force of destruction may also suggest a Safavid or Mughal environment. In a classic study of man-eating among tigers, Charles McDougal writes that "... human beings do not constitute part of the tiger's natural prey. The normal tiger exhibits a deep-rooted aversion to man, with whom he avoids contact."[303] There is no data to confirm an early modern increase in deadly encounters between tigers and humans. However, dramatic rises in human populations, concomitant with a spread of urban and agricultural land into previously wild spaces, have in modern times been correlated with an increase in human-predator violence. Conservative estimates have the Indian population growing by at least 33% between 1600 and 1800, an immense increase for an early modern society. The growing population required that ever greater quantities of land be appropriated for large-scale agriculture: "In nearly every region within the Mughal empire the settler frontier of sedentary agriculture moved forward at the expense of pastoralists in the plains or shifting cultivators in wooded areas."[304] The decimation of prey species undertaken by Mughal hunting parties may also have raised the likelihood of anthropophagy, though this activity certainly impacted tiger populations directly as well.

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[302] Yamamoto, *Oral Background,* 92-93.

[303] Charles McDougal, "The man-eating tiger in geographical and historical perspective," in *Tigers of the World: The Biology, Biopolitics, Management, and Conservation of an Endangered Species*, ed. Ronald L. Tilson and Ulysses S. Seal (New York: Noyes Publications, 1988), 435-448 (435).

[304] John F. Richards, *The New Cambridge History of India (Part 1, Volume 5): The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 190.

There is documentary evidence of tigers preying on humans in premodern India, though it is scattered compared with the starker records of the colonial era.[305] The memoirs of professional hunters such as Jim Corbett testify to the extreme damage that tigers could wreak upon rural areas—in the years preceding 1907, for instance, a single tigress killed approximately 436 people in the vicinity of Champawat, Uttarakhand.[306] Again, a lack of data makes it impossible to say at present if such rampages were a historical constant that only recently became visible in the documentary record, or if they were conditioned by the particular ecosocial conditions of the British Raj. However, cases like that of the Champawat tigress, as well as earlier incidents such as the famous depredations of "la Bête du Gévaudan," testify that the epic portrayal of a single carnivore terrorizing a region is not necessarily hyperbole.

This foray into manuscript studies and the early modern period has sought to indicate the ongoing availability of the *azhdahā* for poets who continued to compose Persian epic verse, long after the tradition's heyday. Ever-mutable, the monster lent itself readily to new stories and new shapes. It offered both a reliably menacing foil for heroes and a memorable link to older times and older texts, even as it allowed novel concerns to be conjured up in its expansively hybrid form.

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[305] For instance, ibn Battuta described the depredations of maneating tiger in Gwalior, during the 1330s (Allsen, *Royal* Hunt, 171); there is also a reference in the *Tuzuk-e Jahangiri* to the emperor slaying a maneating tiger in 1617 (Enayatullah Khan, "Wild Mammals in Mughal Sources," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 72, no. 1 (2011): 556).

[306] Jim Corbett, *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (Bombay [Mumbai]: Oxford University Press, 1944).

Conclusion

The Stakes of Snake-Men

In this chapter, I have argued that the monstrous denizens of Iranian epic known as the *azhdahā* represent a speculative innovation in medieval Persian literature distinct from the allegedly universal category of the "dragon." Against an Indo-Europeanist paradigm that seeks to subsume an array of culturally specific monsters under the rubric of the "Chaos Serpent," doomed to defeat at the hands of the order-bringing hero, the Introduction posited that the *azhdahā* retains the hybrid human-reptile features of its Avestan etymological meaning, "Snake-Man." The *azhdahā* thus becomes a site of tension between monsters as monster theorists would see them—fundamentally human, beneath the fangs and scales—and the fundamental otherness of the anti-anthropic demon proposed by weird theorists. Its particular form emerges in the epic reconfigurations of pre-Islamic legendary material undertaken by early generations of New Persian poets—most importantly, the *Shāhnāmeh* of Ferdowsi—in which it takes its place alongside other fantastical beings. In contrast to contemporaries who denigrated the fantastic as a frivolous mode, writers like Ferdowsi insisted on the efficacy of beings like the *div* and *azhdahā* for thinking through the complexities of human relationships to evil and fate, history and the natural world.

Tracing the role of the *azhdahā* through the monumental *Shāhnāmeh*, I demonstrated how the monster's bursting from the body of the tyrannical Zahhāk sites its emergence at a specific moment in legendary history. Following this, the periodic reappearances of these creatures throughout the poem serve to both test and undermine human claims at dominion over geographies and histories. Emulating Ferdowsi, Asadi-Tusi structures his *Garshāspnāmeh*

around three encounters with *azhdahā*, which embody not only the wonders of creation but also the looming teleology of fate within a single champion's lifetime. This vision is pushed to its grim extreme in the *Bahmannāmeh*, whose titular king is devoured into an oblivion that leaves no room for conceits of human temporal power. Lastly, the variations of the *Dāstān-e Babr-e Bayān* indicate the ongoing versatility and adaptability of the *azhdahā* well into the early modern period.

The speculative past inhabited by the *azhdahā* is one in which human relationships to being are altered. Aristocratic champions find their hunting grounds contested by another armored, sentient, macropredatory creature, entirely alien yet eerily reminiscent of the anthropic forms in which its origin lies. And though the warrior's victory over this challenger is nearly always assured, the lurking *azhdahā* comes to prefigure another devourer against which every attempt is ultimately in vain: *zamāneh*, time or fate.

Over time, these monstrous creatures vanish from the landscape. They go extinct, or are exiled to distant realms—pagan kingdoms, uninhabited islands, the ocean depths—from which their remains can only be retrieved, after great risk, as static objects of wonder. But the status of the more ineffable celestial *azhdahā* remains unclear. The advent of Islam offered believers salvation from all-devouring time, in soul if not in body. Yet even as fate and time (*dahr, zamān*) could be synonymized with God's awesome power ("*wa ana ad-dahru*,"[307] "and I am time/fate," God declares, in a well-known ḥadīth), Muslim poets continued to recognize it as a distinct, fickle, and ultimately adversarial force. Examples abound across the Islamicate world. "*Anna-z-zamāna-l-ladhī mā zāla yuḍḥikunā / unsan bi-qurbihimu qad 'āda yubkīnā*," laments the Andalusian poet ibn Zaydūn in his *Nūniyya* ("Poem in N")—"That time that used / to make us

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[307] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 65, no. 4826 and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* 2246b.

laugh / when they were near / returns to make us grieve,"[308] in Michael Sells' poignant rendering. In Persian, the depiction of this power as an *azhdahā* remained current well into the twentieth century: "*Sarānjām, azhdahā-ye to-st giti / to ākhar ta'meh-ye in azhdahā-i*"[309] ("In the end, the world is your *azhdahā*; / after all, you are just bait for this *azhdahā*") wrote Parvin Eʿtesāmi (1907-1941).

But metaphorical usages like this necessarily provoke reflection on their always-absent monstrous referent. Poets suggested that *azhdahā* had once inhabited the earth in all their scaly glory, but could now only be grappled with in figurative terms. In doing so, they depicted a loss; an extinction leaving behind a less perilous but undoubtedly impoverished world. Within imagined pasts, the chimeric *azhdahā* pushes the possibilities of becoming-nonhuman to a grotesque yet liberatory extreme. It provides a paradigm of speculative monstrosity more complex than that now fossilized around the overdetermined figure of the "dragon"; perhaps it would be richer to think of metamorphized beings like Fáfnir of the *Vǫlsunga saga* as *azhdahā*, "Snake-Men," rather than merely "dragons."[310]

Repeatedly in Persian epic, the *azhdahā*'s menace is cast in sexual terms. Clearest in the libidinous rapacity of Zahhāk and the cloudy creature slain by Borzin-e Āzar, this valence creeps also into the ensnaring feminine *gisu* that several of these creatures possess, Esfandiyār's penetration of his opponent's gullet, and the caress of the serpent that marks young Bozorjmehr. These monstrous desires suggest that the threat of alterity is matched only by its attractions. In

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[308] Abū-l-Walīd Aḥmad ibn Zaydūn al-Makhzūmī, "The *Nūniyya* (Poem in N) of ibn Zaydūn," trans. Michael Sells, in *The Literature of Al-Andalus*, ed. María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, and Michael Sells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 491-496.

[309] Parvin Eʿtesāmi, "Qasideh 42," in *Divān-e Parvin Eʿtesāmi*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1987).

[310] "*Hann gerðisk svá illr at hann lagðisk út… ok varð síðan at inum versta ormi*," "He grew so evil that he slunk into the outlands… and in time became the worst kind of wyrm" (R. G. Finch, ed., *Vǫlsunga saga* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1965), 26).

the next chapter, I analyze how another cosmopolitan medieval literary culture used amorous

relations between humans and other beings to explore the alien intimacies of the past.

Chapter III

Seductive Others:

What Did It Mean to Love the Otherworldly in Medieval France?

Introduction

Beings in Time: Poetry and Parahumans on the Borders of *Bretagne*

Enumerating the great host that had sailed to conquer England with William of Normandy a century before he wrote his *Roman de Rou* ("Romance of Rollo"), the poet Wace paused his catalogue when he came to the contingent of Breton knights from *Brecheliant*. He deemed this forest—*Koadeg Breselien*, Brocéliande,[1] perhaps the modern wood of Paimpont twenty-five miles west of Rennes—worthy of an extended and unusually personal aside.

> *...Brecheliant*
> *Donc Breton vont sovent fablant,*
> *Une forest mult longue e lee*
> *Qui en Bretaigne est mult loee*
> *...*
> *La seut l'en les fees veeir,*
> *Se li Bretuns nos dient veir,*
> *E altres mer(e)veilles plusors;*
> *Aires i selt aveir d'ostors*[2]

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[1] The etymology of this place name is uncertain; the first element could conceivably be Breton *bro*, "land, country," but native forms uninfluenced by the French name are lacking (and Wace's spelling with an 'e' only further complicates matters). Modern usage tends towards "Brocéliande."

[2] Holden italicizes *d'ostors*, indicating an editorial intervention; older editions have the somewhat more baffling "*Aigres solt avéir destors*" (For instance, Wace, *Le Roman de Rou et des Ducs de Normandie, Tome II*, ed. Édouard Frère (Rouen: Libraire de la Bibliothèque Publique, 1827), 143). In his 1837 English translation, Edgar Taylor renders this as "The ground is broken and precipitous," presumably taking *aigres* to mean something like "*aigu*" and *destors* as meaning "*detournement*" or perhaps "*tourment*" (Edgar Taylor, trans., *Master Wace: His Chronicle of the Norman Conquest from the Roman de Rou* (London: William Pickering, 1837), 119). An alternate approach might be to take *aigres* as referring to large waterfowl ("egrets" but also herons or cranes) and *destors* as *d'estors*, "*Tout ce qui est nécessaire à qqn, tout ce qui convient à qqn, ressource*," so that the line would mean "Cranes used to have all they needed there." The only advantage of this over Holden's reading would be to replace a common bird with a less

E de grant cers mult grant plenté,
Mais vilain ont tot deserté.
La alai jo merveilles querre,
Vi la forest e vi la terre;
Merveilles quis, maís nes trovai;
Fol m'en revinc, fol i alai,
Fol i alai, fol m'en revinc,
Folie quis, por fol me tinc.[3]

(…Brocéliande, / about which Bretons often go telling tales: / a forest very broad and vast, / which is widely famed in Brittany / … / One used[4] to see fairies there, / if the Bretons tell us the truth, / and many other marvels: / there used to be goshawks' eyries there, / and a very great abundance of great stags, / but the peasants have despoiled it all. / I went there seeking marvels; / I saw the forest and saw the ground; / I sought marvels, but did not find any. / A fool I returned, a fool I went; /a fool I went, a fool returned. / I sought folly; count me a fool.)

As in his description of Arthur's passage to Avalon, discussed below, Wace's verse

evades firm commitments to the truth of marvels. When the Bretons heap praise on the forest,

they are *fablant*, "fabling," telling tales; and in the famous last lines of this passage, the poet's

scorn extends from himself (*fol*) to his entire venture (*folie*). Wace's unsuccessful quest for

Breton marvels allows scholars like Richard Firth Green, focusing on these concluding verses, to

position the poet as "a skeptic; he had sought empirical evidence and found it lacking."[5]

But a poet seeking to lampoon Breton tall tales could certainly have conjured a more

marvelous menagerie to accompany the *fees* (fairies) than *ostors* (goshawks) and *cers* (stags);

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common one; though given that the other animal referred to in this passage, the *cerf* (*Cervus elaphus*) is not particularly rare, this may be a moot point (all definitions cited from Robert Martin, *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français (1330–1500): DMF2009*, www.atilf.fr/dmf.)

[3] Wace, *Le Roman de Rou*, ed. A. J. Holden (Paris: Éditions A. & J. Picard & Cie, 1970), 122.

[4] *Soloir* generally means "to be accustomed to do," but in certain cases its use in the present tense seems to provide a sense of the imperfect; for instance, the third definitional citation in the online *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*—"*Sun cors, qui sout estre tant ben vestu, / A ben prof le veit tut nu* Gui War 9661" (*Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, Online edition, http://www.anglo-norman.net/D/soloir, accessed 18 Feb 2020.) While Wace could intend a simple present meaning ("One tends to see fairies there"), the context argues otherwise, particularly the contrastive *mais + passé composé* a few lines later. "Used to" is the translation offered by F. H. M. Le Saux in *A Companion to Wace*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 188.

[5] Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 35. James Wade points out that others have made a similar error in discussing this passage (James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 58).

and a more dramatic extinction event than deforestation. The woodland of the Breton tales was apparently not a Cockaigne of implausible fantasies but a rich ecosystem in which a variety of creatures flourished. And while unmappable otherworlds might endure endlessly, Brocéliande has here proved fatally vulnerable to the ravages of agricultural civilization. Wace seems to say that he is only partly a fool for seeking the wonders of Brocéliande; he is mostly a fool for seeking them *now*, a naïve searcher after beings now extinct.

These lines reveal a proto-ecological consciousness recalling that of the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd in the (roughly contemporary?) Welsh *Culhwch ac Olwen*. The Armorican peninsula, on the western edge of Europe, is depicted in the *Roman de Rou* as a one-time refugium for creatures who could not coexist with intensive human habitation. Wace suggests both that such ecologies could be capacious in their incorporation of supernatural beings alongside more quotidian animals; and that the former were perhaps uniquely threatened by the erosive forces of colonial history. Goshawks and stags endure, after all; *fees* are a different matter. Wace's yearning to experience Brocéliande as it once was represents a desire for the past; the Breton *fables* are figured less as targets of ridicule than as elegies for a more marvelous world.

Towards the end of Wace's career, a new genre was emerging in the varied Northern dialects of the *langue d'oïl*. It seems, by and large, to have been the invention of a singular master poet about whom nothing for certain is known but her works, her first name, and her claimed land of origin: Marie de France. The twelve poems usually referred to as her *lais*, together with many of the anonymous works which capitalized on their success, are animated by the same spirit of wonder and loss that characterize Wace's treatment of Brocéliande. Like the Jersey poet, they situate this spirit in the Brittonic West—*Bretaigne le menur* (Brittany/Breizh) as well as portions of Great Britain along the Welsh and Scottish borders—and in the past.

Among the many marvels they treat, none recur as frequently or are explored in as much depth as the complicated networks of desire that link humans to nonhuman beings dwelling beyond the spatial and temporal bounds of courtly culture. Unlike Wace, however, Marie's poems display a fascinating reluctance to name these beings as *fees*, or as anything else. They commit instead to a poetics of ambiguity.

This chapter examines six works traditionally termed "Breton *lais*," three by Marie—*Guigemar*, *Yonec*, and *Lanval*—and three of unknown authorship—*Tydorel*, *Graelent*, and *Guingamor*. In each of these, erotic relationships between humans and what I term "parahumans" trouble societal stability and the historical understanding upon which it rests. The violence, hybrid children, and occulted heroes that result from these unions threaten the colonial, gendered, and temporal hierarchies under which they occur, even as they usually fail to overturn them.

In this introduction, I will lay out some of the key features of the "Breton *lai*" and highlight problems that this genre poses, particularly in its relationship to Celtic literature. I will then turn to my proposed category of the "parahuman," which suggests itself in part as a response to the interpretive difficulties of the so-called *lais* as translated, colonial, and/or appropriative literature. An exploration of the parahuman leads naturally to a discussion of the realms inhabited by such beings; the relationship of these otherworlds with the literary idea of the past; and the nature of those non-normative humans who are drawn into relations with these alterities. With this interpretive background established, I will offer an outline of this chapter's two parts, "Hybrid Worlds: *Guigemar*, *Yonec*, & *Tydorel*" and "Lovers Occulted: *Lanval*, *Graelent, & Guingamor*," before closing the introduction with a brief reflection on the stakes of reading the poetic narratives of Marie and her successors in the present moment.

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The texts now often referred to as "Breton *lais*" are short narrative poems written in various dialects of Old French and Middle English, along with some prose adaptations into Old Norse. At the heart of the corpus are twelve poems in octosyllabic couplets dating from the late twelfth century, probably between the late 1150's and c. 1170.[6] The British Library manuscript Harley 978, copied towards the end of the thirteenth century, includes (alongside a wide range of "poems, fables, musical, and medical texts,"[7]), these twelve together with a short, first-person prologue that relates the circumstances of their composition. Only in the first lines of the first poem, *Guigemar*, does the narrator name herself, and then in the third person: "*Oëz, seignurs, ke dit Marie*" ("Listen, lords, to what Marie tells."[8])

This Marie's identity has long been the subject of debate. It is now generally accepted that she is the same poet who names herself as the author of *La vie seinte Audree* ("The Life of Saint Audrey"); *L'Espurgatoire saint Patrice* ("Saint Patrick's Purgatory," a translation of the Latin *Tractatus de Purgatorio sancti Patricii*); and *Ysopet* ("Aesop," a translation of Aesop's fables from an English original.) This last is the only text in which she provides a further epithet: "*Marie ai num, si sui de France*" ("Marie's my name, and I'm from France.") *France* here could indicate either a geographically specific origin—presumably in *Île-de-France*, the region around Paris that was the only part of the kingdom plausibly identifiable as *France* in the late twelfth

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[6] This is the range proposed by Glyn S. Burgess, *The Lays of Marie de France* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 34. More recent studies have not proposed any radically different schemes.

[7] "Harley MS 978," *Digitised Manuscripts*, British Library, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_978.

[8] Marie de France, *Guigemar*, in *Lais de Marie de France*, trans. Alexandra Micha, (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 34 (line 3). Micha's translations are into Modern French; all translations in this chapter are by the current author unless otherwise noted.

century—or the more general homeland of a poet working abroad, presumably in Angevin England.[9]

On the basis of this line from the *Ysopet*, the author has been identified with virtually every attested Marie from the Anglo-French world of the late twelfth century. While her high level of education suggests a noblewoman, perhaps even a prominent one, there is no particular reason to assume that she might be found in other surviving sources from the period. Like so many other historical quests for "the real X," the truth is elusive, and the only meaningful identity we are likely to settle on for Marie is as the author of an extraordinary set of late twelfth century French texts that betray an interest, and perhaps some local familiarity, with northwestern France and western Britain.

Marie's works became known across a wide swathe of Europe, and inspired a number of mostly anonymous authors to compose similar verses.[10] In Old French alone, Marie's twelve poems survive alongside an additional twenty-four anonymous verse tales,[11] but there were once certainly many more. Shrewsbury School MS VII, a 13th century catalogue, lists sixty-seven, including some but not all of the extant corpus and many more whose subjects can only be guessed from their titles.[12]

The genre of Marie's poems and their successors is generally known as the "*lai breton*," the Breton *lai* or lay. Both of these terms, however, are problematic. Marie does not refer to her

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[9] This basic information is rehearsed in virtually every substantial work on Marie; see, e.g., Laurence Harf-Lancner, "Introduction," *Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Karl Warnke, trans. and ann. Laurence Harf-Lancner (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1990), 7-9, though this predates the ascription to her of *La vie seinte Audree*.

[10] Given the difficulties of dating these texts precisely, it is possible that other French texts claiming to narrativize *lais*, surviving or not, predate Marie's oeuvre. However, her own description of her craft in the *Prologue* indicates otherwise; and the consensus of modern scholars is that hers represent the earliest examples of the genre.

[11] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, "General Introduction," in *French Arthurian Literature, Volume IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, ed. Burgess and Brook (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 2.

[12] Georgine E. Brereton, "A Thirteenth-Century List of French Lays and Other Narrative Poems," *The Modern Language Review* 45, no. 1 (Jan., 1950): 40-45.

own compositions as *lais*; rather, she says, her poems are based on *lais* that she has heard ("*Des lais pensai qu'oïz aveie*," "I thought of the *lais* that I had heard…"[13]). Hers is, rather, a new and somewhat artificial form—French octosyllabic verses providing narrative *reisuns* (maybe comparable to the *razos* of the troubadours) for *lais* that she had previously heard.[14] Evidence from other sources implies that these latter are likely to have been musical pieces, perhaps particularly for the harp;[15] Marie suggests they were composed for the "*remambrance*" of various "*aventures*" (adventures, but also "events, remarkable occurrences.") Perceiving them to be an endangered art, and seeking material for her own poetic talents, she was inspired to action: "*Nes voil laissier ne oblier. / Rimé en ai et fait ditié, / Soventes fiez en ai veillié*"[16] ("I didn't want them to be abandoned or forgotten; / I rhymed them, and made them poems; / many times I worked at this through the night."[17]) At the start of *Guigemar*, she again distinguishes her *contes* from the Breton *lais*: "*Les contes ke jo sai verrais, / Dunt li Bretun unt fait les lais, / Vos conterai assez briefment*"[18] (The tales which I know to be true / from which the Bretons made the *lais* / I will tell you, quite concisely.") And again, at the poem's end: "*De cest cunte ke oï avez / Fu* Guigemar *le lai trovez, / Que hum fait en harpe e en rote; / Bone en est oïr la note*"[19] ("From the tale that you have heard, / the *lai* of Guigemar was shaped[20] / which people perform on the harp and rote; / It is sweet to hear its notes.") By her own account, then, Marie's works are more

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[13] Marie de France, *Prologue*, in *Lais de Marie de France*, trans. Alexandre Micha (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 32 (line 33).

[14] Ronald Cook, "Marie's lais and Music: In Her Own Words," *Le Cygne* 1 (Fall 2014): 11-12.

[15] See, e.g., Christopher Page, *Voices and Instruments of the Middle Ages: Instrumental practice and songs in France 1100-1300* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1987), 97-107; Cook, "Marie's lais," 7-20.

[16] Marie, *Prologue*, 32 (lines 40-42).

[17] *Ditié* is equally "story, lyrics, written text."

[18] Marie *Guigemar*, 34 (lines 19-21).

[19] Marie, *Guigemar*, 78 (lines 883-886).

[20] *Trover* literally means "to find"; it thus implies a very different orientation of musician to creative art than, e.g., "to compose," "to write," etc. "To shape" (cf. Old English *scieppan*) is also different, but likewise implies some extant quality of the artist's material.

properly *ditiés* or *cuntes*, providing background narratives for pre-existing musical *lais* with which they are linked but not congruent.

The alleged composers of these songs, *li bretun*, raise an even thornier set of issues. These are presumably speakers of Brittonic (that is, "P-Celtic") languages—Breton/*Brezhoneg*, Cornish/*Kernowek*, or Welsh/*Cymraeg*—whose ethnonyms were not often rigorously delineated in Old French dialects. In the late twelfth century, these "Britons" were far from monolithic, politically or culturally. They included noblemen fully integrated into the ruling structures of the Angevin Empire, like the descendants of the Breton knights lauded by Wace; the inhabitants of independent polities, such as the Duchy of Brittany (*Dugelezh Breizh*) or the Kingdom of Gwynedd (*Teyrnas Gwynedd*) in North Wales, often nominally tributary to the Angevins or Capetians but frequently in conflict with them; the common people of Cornwall or the Welsh Marcher territories, who might be considered colonized subjects;[21] and others who participated

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[21] While it raises the specter of anachronism, the concept of colonialism has become a widely used lens within Celtic Studies for understanding the expansion of English dominance over Cornwall, Wales, Ireland, Man, and (much later) the Scottish Highlands; and French dominance over Brittany (a handful of examples explicitly addressing this definition might include, e.g., R. R. Davis, "Colonial Wales," *Past and Present* 65 (Nov. 1974): 3-23; Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1975); Jack E. Reece, "Internal colonialism: The case of Brittany," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 3 (1979): 275-292; John Gibney, "Early Modern Ireland: A British Atlantic Colony?" *History Compass* 6, no. 1 (2008): 172-182.) The generalized picture in all these cases is one of conquest by a culturally distinct polity that claims control over land, imports settlers who exert outsize political influence over indigenes, extracts labor and raw materials, denies attempts at meaningful local sovereignty, and directly or indirectly suppresses native linguistic and cultural expression. Indeed, the "internal colonialism" that England, France, and other nations enacted within Europe may be seen as providing a training ground for their endeavors in other parts of the globe; and later, networks of solidarity linked anti-imperial activists in Celtic countries with independence movements elsewhere (see, e.g., Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008). For the use of postcolonial theory in medieval studies, many of which touch on Celtic issues, see, e.g., Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Bruce W. Holsinger, "Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique," *Speculum* 77, no. 4 (Oct. 2002): 1195-1227; Lisa Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). Sources cited within this study that employ the framework of colonialism include: Catherine McKenna, "The Colonization of Myth in *Branwen Ferch Lŷr*"; Helen Fulton, "Magic and the Supernatural in Early Welsh Arthurian Narrative: *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*," (e.g., 7); Jenny Adams, "Colonizing the Otherworld in *Walewein*,"; Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006 (her chapter on Marie is entitled "Colonial Possessions: Wales and the Anglo-Norman Imaginary in the *Lais* of Marie de France," 105-132); Michelle R. Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain*, 1100-1300 (Minneapolis:

in multiple, overlapping categories of identity, or occupied different statuses depending on specific contexts.

It is therefore problematic to assert, as some analyses have, that Marie's *bretun* were necessarily or solely colonial subalterns. At the same time, there is no question that Brittonic languages did not occupy nearly the same positions of international prestige as the *langues d'oïl*, which in that period were the courtly, administrative, and literary tongues of elites from Scotland to Sicily to Syria. Without indulging in a teleological approach to history, it is worth noting that within a few decades of Marie's floruit, Brittany would become a vassal of the French monarchy, though it retained varying degrees of sovereignty until 1532. And within about a century of Marie's era—as discussed in the Introduction to Chapter I—the last independent Welsh principalities would be subjugated to the English crown. As such, Marie's poems might be said to represent appropriative gestures, privileged re-voicings, over-writings, and popularizations of indigenous material. At the same time, given the paucity of surviving Brittonic texts from the Middle Ages, our lack of biographical information about her, and her own stated intentions, they might be viewed as acts of vital preservation.

But a preservation of what? If there were words to the Brittonic *lais* that Marie turned into French verse, no texts of any such originals have been found. Despite a frequent insistence on the clear "Celtic" quality of Marie's poems, it is important to emphasize how different they are from any surviving medieval literature in Welsh or Irish (to say nothing of Breton). Without ascribing any particular qualities to all of "Celtic literature," it is still possible to assert how little Marie's works resemble the contemporary or near-contemporary cultural productions of their alleged source cultures. Her poems are straightforward narrative verse, presenting unified plots

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University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Michael Faletra, "Chivalric Identity at the Frontier: Marie's Welsh "Lais,"" *Le Cygne* (new series) 4, *Special Issue in honor of Judith Rice Rothchild* (Fall 2006) (e.g., 30 and 34-35).

with very few characters, even fewer of whom have names. Such a mode is virtually unknown in medieval Celtic languages (at least until the late medieval period, when continental influence can be felt in the lyric anecdotes of Dafydd ap Gwilym and his contemporaries). No medieval Breton poetry has survived, but the overwhelming majority of early Welsh verse—for instance, nearly all of that contained in *Llyfr Aneirin* or *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin*—if it suggests narrative at all, does so without offering coherent plot lines. It abounds in the names of people and places, and alludes to various dramatic deeds (battles, murders, love affairs, exiles, etc.) But the exact relationships of these elements are almost never made clear within the verse itself. Hence the extensive "reconstructions" that philologists have attempted since modern scholarly attention first turned to these works in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, as this chapter will discuss in extensive detail, Marie's and her successors' treatments of the supernatural are allusive and impressionistic, rather than the direct invocation of the otherworldly realms of *Annwfn* and related concepts employed by Welsh narratives. Altogether, as Constance Bullock-Davies writes, "The two literatures—Celtic and Neo-Celtic—are worlds apart in terms of poetic vision, imaginative grasp, metaphorical sweep, verse technique and overall literary texture." Content was transmitted rather than form, and in the process was "endowed with new, anachronistic values."[22] For Bullock-Davies, this transformation represents a loss: "All that is left of the Celtic story, after denudation and detrition of this kind, is a vague and imperfect framework of ideas."[23] That Bullock Davies's terminology echoes Wace's lament for the destruction of Brocéliande is, one suspects, not entirely accidental.

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[22] Constance Bullock-Davies, *Professional Interpreters and the Matter of Britain: a lecture delivered at a colloquium of the Departments of Welsh in the University of Wales at Gregynog, 26 June, 1965* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), 3.
[23] Bullock-Davies, *Interpreters*, 5.

Given these differences, we might question whether there ever existed primordial Brittonic versions of the stories Marie tells, in anything like their extant form.[24] The claimed "Breton" origin may be primarily a signal of their exoticism, an association with a poorly understood and partly colonized culture that was (and still is) seen as possessing privileged connections to an antique past. Marie herself almost certainly did not speak any Celtic language: suffice it to review the philological contortions that scholars have suffered in trying to account for her alleged Breton term for a werewolf, *bisclavret*.[25] As such, "we cannot rule out the possibility that each of her references to *lais* composed by the Bretons was merely a literary device intended to cast a fashionable Celtic aura over her narratives."[26] Christopher Page treats discourse around the *lais* as itself a "legend," one in which skilled noble storytellers performed songs "fraught with the romance of the ancient Celtic realms of the North." Artists operating in different media and court settings might wish to

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[24] Despite the difficulties noted here, even otherwise rigorous Celticists have been enchanted by the notion that authentic, versified Breton narratives lie just out of reach behind the Old French poems. Rachel Bromwich published a short piece to that effect, imagining that although "[t]here is no evidence from Wales or Brittany that any similar development took place from prose-verse saga to episodic lay or ballad[, …] there are certain considerations which suggest that such a development could have occurred." From there, she goes on to assert, without referencing any specific texts, that Marie "knew that narrative poems of a type somewhat similar to her own existed in Breton, for at some previous date which can hardly have been earlier than the beginning of the twelfth century the older Breton prose-verse saga with lyrical interludes of the Llywarch Hen type had begun to be recast in the form of narrative lays" (Rachel Bromwich, "A Note on the Breton Lays," *Medium Ævum* 26, no. 1 (1957): 37.) Mattieu Boyd has echoed and extended these arguments, hinging his contention on Donatien Laurent's study of the Breton folksong *Gwerz Skol(v)an*. Though collected in the 19th century, this song bears unmistakable similarities to a fragmentary Welsh poem, referred to by the cognate name *Cerdd Ysgolan*, in the thirteenth-century *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Matthieu Boyd, "Breton Lay," in *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain*, ed. Siân Echard and Robert Rouse (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 334. But contrary to Boyd's assertions, *Gwerz Skol(v)an* and *Cerdd Ysgolan* are nothing like the *lais*. They are dialogue-poems, referring to (or perhaps enacting?) narratives, but not relating them. The existence of this verse-form is well-attested in Welsh; we have a number of extant *ymddiddan* (dialogue) poems, and a famous reference in the *Mabinogi* of *Math fab Mathonwy* to their performance by a professional storyteller (Ian Hughes, ed. *Math uab Mathonwy* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2013), 3). The works of Marie and her successors, by contrast, have little direct speech and even less dialogue; they are not performable scenes but stories extending over time and space. As such, arguments for their structural relations to any medieval Celtic literature, extant or otherwise, remain unconvincing.

[25] Proposed glosses include those of J. Loth (*bisc lavret*, "short trousers"[?]); H. Zimmer (*bleiz lavaret*, "speaking wolf"); Th. Chotzen (*bleidd llafar*, "dear little speaking wolf/*bon loup fatidique*"); H. W. Bailey (*bleiz laveret*, "rational wolf"); W. Sayers (*bleiz claffet*, "wolf-sick, wolf-leper, lycanthrope) (Burgess, *Lays*, 9). The few recognizable Breton terms Marie does employ are almost all titles, e.g. *Laüstic* (Breton *eostic*, nightingale, though note the incorporated French article). Against this, compare her generally more transparent English terminology (e.g., *nihtegale* for the preceding term); the *Ysopet*, as mentioned above, is translated from an English original.

[26] Cook, "Marie's lais," 12.

exploit this myth to different ends, and so "[i]t was in the interest of twelfth-century entertainers to keep the mythology of the ancient *lai* vague and mysterious…"[27] In part due to these issues, scholars have sought other terms for this corpus: Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, for instance, propose "narrative lay,"[28] though this term still elides the extant textual forms with their alleged musical templates.

Yet the *ditiés* of Marie and her imitators undoubtedly draw on names, geographies, narrative situations, and other tropes rooted in Brittonic cultures—albeit refashioned by and for a dominant literary ecosystem, in which the "Celtic" may have had, as it perhaps retains today, a certain subaltern exoticism. The resultant poems are what Michelle R. Warren characterizes as "border writing," which "figures history as a space shaped by blood and ink, by sword and chronicle."[29] They are texts marked by the economic, cultural, martial, and sexual exchanges that occurred across the shifting lines of Anglo-Norman dominion and Breton or Welsh resistance and assimilation. The presence of translators and multilingual storytellers at courts of the period is well-documented, as Constance Bullock-Davies asserts: "*Cyfarwyddiaid*, latimers, and French, Welsh, and English minstrels lived together in the same castles along the Welsh Marches from the time of the Conquest. They could not have failed to impart to one another something of each of their native literatures."[30] In settings such as these, literary negotiation and friction amongst indigenes, invaders, people of mixed origin, and others led not only to the development of Marie's poems but to the entire corpus of non-Welsh Arthurian literature, the *matière de Bretagne*—to borrow Jean Bodel's classification from his own border narrative, the *Chanson des Saisnes*.

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[27] Page, *Voices*, 97-107.
[28] Burgess and Brook, "Introduction," 1.
[29] Warren, *History,* 2.
[30] Bullock-Davies, *Interpreters*, 18.

By Marie's day, French writers seem to have regarded *Bretagne*, broadly conceived, as a particularly potent site for imagining a history shot through with destabilizing alterity. As Dubost writes, "Fortement improbable *hic et nunc*, la merveille est conçue comme possible dans l'autrefois breton, qui est aussi un ailleurs éthique." "*Breton*" functions here less as a specific ethnolinguistic referent than as a signifier of spatio-temporal alterity, located within this world but open to infiltration by others. Dubost posits that "La Bretagne imaginaire est en effet perçue globalement comme un espace-temps accueillant aux fantasmes..."[31] As a chronotope, the lost kingdoms of the Brittonic West proved fertile ground for romancers: distant enough to retain a stark cultural distinction from the centers of Anglo-French power, yet near enough to visit, as Wace did; past enough to imagine as zones of alternate possibility, yet recent enough that these possibilities still might linger, as Wace hoped.

"Fairy" Problems and Parahuman Potential

In comparison to the *matière de France*, the heroic *chansons de geste* that relate the exploits of Carolingian and crusader heroes, works comprising the *matière de Bretagne* tend to feature a greater proportion of magical characters and fantastic occurrences (often referred to as *merveilles*, "marvels," in French scholarship).[32] An unfortunate quantity of critical approaches to these texts falls into the problematic (and colonialist) presumption that "Celticity" = "otherworldliness," with neither term problematized.[33] But as more careful researchers note,

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[31] Dubost, "Motifs," 46.

[32] The paradigmatic example is the *Chanson de Roland*, which besides the paladins' superheroic feats of arms remains largely rooted in historical plausibility. Over time, texts began to blend the characters, motifs, and styles of the *matières de Bretagne* and *de France* as well as the antique *matière de Rome*; the *Roman d'Auberon* (c. 1260-1311), for instance, brings together Judah Maccabee, Julius Caesar, King Arthur, Morgan la Fee, and the fairy king Oberon, all in prelude to the theoretically Carolingian tale of Huon of Bordeaux (Jean Subrenat, ed., *Le Roman d'Auberon: Prologue de Huon de Bordeaux* (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1973)).

[33] While this tendency is most pronounced in early scholarship—virtually the entire output of R. S. Loomis, for instance—it still crops up in more recent work, generally by scholars with minimal grounding in Celtic Studies: Bernard Sergent's *L'Origine Celtique des Lais de Marie de France* (Librarie Droz: Genève, 2014) is one of the more

many of the marvelous motifs in the work of Marie and her successors do not seem particularly indebted to Celtic literatures. These texts—as noted above, and investigated to some degree in the first chapter of this dissertation—tend to approach the uncanny and mystical quite differently.[34] It seems more likely that the supernatural interests of poems like Marie's grow not from some residual and atavistic "Celticity," but rather from the uncertainty, hybridity, and charged interchanges of the border zones in which they are set. Aisling Byrne proposes that "politically contested" lands may be particularly associated with magical realms because, as sites of competing interests, they are "more demanding of analysis than their stable counterparts and, as such, the subject of a greater number of explorations of every kind." The literary idea of the otherworld in such contexts acts as "a highly malleable and imaginatively potent model for imagining space, and, crucially, lends itself particularly well to the exploration of political authority."[35]

Yet it would be reductive to claim that the otherworld figures and zones of these texts simply represent the socio-cultural uncertainties and political possibilities of Northwestern Europe's borderlands. On the contrary, among my central claims in the analyses that follow is that the alterity of supernatural beings and spaces is not reducible to allegory or figurative representation of human difference. In this I follow the scholarship of Richard Firth Green, who

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egregious examples. This tendency can even slip into otherwise sound arguments, e.g. Katherine McLoone's notion that "Wales is the otherworld to twelfth-century Anglo-Normans" (Katherine McLoone, "Strange Bedfellows: Politics, Miscegenation, and *Translatio* in Two Lays of Lanval," *Arthuriana* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 10); Stephen G. Nichols' invocation of the "Celtic fantastic" to account for a set of motifs in *Guigemar* that have nothing particularly Celtic about them (Stephen G. Nichols, "Marie de France's Commonplaces," *Yale French Studies, Special Issue: Contexts: Style and Values in Medieval Art and Literature* (1991): 147); or Sharon Kinoshita's direct mapping of the conflict between the *avouez* and Muldumarec in *Yonec* onto a struggle between "Anglo-Norman" and "indigenous" cultures (Kinoshita, *Boundaries*, 105-124).

[34] This point is made by, e.g., Green, *Elf Queens*, 5; Wade, *Fairies*, 33; and perhaps most pointedly, Aisling Byrne: "All too often, 'Celtic' tends to serve as a catch-all term for those things in medieval English texts that are supernatural and intractable, like otherworld spaces…" (Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8).

[35] Byrne, *Otherworlds,* 167-168.

argues in his 2016 *Elf Queens and Holy Friars* that our inability to read the otherworld on its own terms hampers our understanding of medieval texts. He cites a range of clerical and lay sources to argue that "[t]o take the fairy machinery of medieval romance as nothing more than a convenient narrative device… is to ignore the fact that people in the Middle Ages were themselves far from indifferent to truth claims about fairies."[36] Indeed, "medieval stories of fairyland were far from ideologically neutral,"[37] invoking spirited rebuttals from church authorities. Legal claims rested on accounts of interaction between human and nonhuman beings—Green cites the magical fairy Spring of Barenton, mentioned in Wace's description of Brocéliande, appearing in Chrétien's *Yvain* and its Welsh analogue *Iarlles y Ffynnon*, and used to validate the legal rights of the Lord of Montfort in a fifteenth century text.[38] Green argues that our understandings of generic ontology can be warped by the mere presence of otherworldly beings: "…we have been conditioned by the age of enlightenment to construe any story containing fairies as a literary fantasy, and we tend unreflectively to project such conditioning back upon our medieval ancestors." However, "such an attitude would have found far fewer supporters in the Middle Ages than it does now."[39] While popular understandings of medieval people might, on the contrary, tend towards imagining them as credulous in the extreme towards all manner of marvels, Green here seems to be making a more subtle point about genre. Reading medieval tales of supernatural beings, we must be open to a broad range of generic possibilities, over and beyond the purely fictive.

As these quotations suggest, Green's preferred term for these beings is "fairies." This is the English derivative of the word that appears in the Wace passage cited above, *fee* (Modern

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[36] Green, *Elf Queens,* 33.
[37] Green, *Elf Queens*, 41.
[38] Green, *Elf Queens*, 34-39.
[39] Green, *Elf Queens*, 71.

French *fée*), via an abstract noun form (Modern French *féerie*, "fairy-land," "fairy magic"). Laurence Harf-Lancner traces the emergence of *fee* from Latin *fata*—originally, the Parcae or Fates who measured and clipped human lifespans in cosmic thread. The term thus retained a link to divination and imagined power; in premodern texts, it often signified mortal female magic practitioners as much as, if not more than, a distinct class of supernatural beings.[40] Modern understandings of "fairy/*fée*," however, tend heavily towards the latter; and there does indeed seem to be an important categorical distinction, even in medieval sources, between humans who could learn to perform magic and other beings who possess it inherently.

For the latter, Green offers the following definition: "that class of numinous, social, humanoid creatures who were widely believed to live at the fringes of the human lifeworld and interact intermittently with human beings." As such, they are distinct from, for instance, solitary giants and the household spirits which exist fully integrated into human domestic ecologies.[41] Straightforward as this might seem, Green does not offer clarification on what he means by "numinous"; indeed, this adjective's distinctly religious connotations seem at odds with his book's central thesis, on the conflict between fairy belief and Christian orthodoxy throughout the Middle Ages. Yet the word fills a crucial gap in Green's definition; without it, he could just as well be talking about bonobos. There is something ineffably supernatural about the creatures Green wishes to discuss; articulating it, however, proves challenging.

Other writers, wary of the pitfalls inherent to the offering of definitions, describe these beings more discursively. James Wade, for instance, emphasizes how fairies demonstrate freedom from time, space, morality, and narrative logic.[42] This unrestrained nature, however, entails a

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[40] Laurence Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées au Moyen Age*: *Morgane et Mélusine: La Naissance des fées* (Genève: Editions Slatkine, 1984), 11-17.
[41] Green, *Elf Queens*, 4.
[42] Wade, *Fairies*, 1.

certain categorical fuzziness that can impede their study; "what makes fairies most interesting—their mysteriousness, their tendency to behave arbitrarily or illogically, and what we might call their conceptual and narratological in-betweenness—is also what makes them resistant to the more traditional methodologies of comparative analysis."[43] Insofar as Wade suggests any quality that might define fairies, it is their possession of "power—the power to perform marvels, to create illusions, to heal, and to otherwise perform deeds beyond the limits of normal human agency."[44] But this is belied by medieval texts' repeated reminders of fairy weaknesses and failings. Perhaps even more importantly, the notion of "power" does not create a clear distinction from human sorcerers. While Wade does propose "a frequent though often erratic shift toward the rationalization of fairy figures, in which fairies were recast as mortals who obtained their supernatural powers through the study of nigromancy (black magic) and the liberal arts,"[45] his analysis depends on maintaining a degree of separation between beings of inherent fairy nature and human wizards who learn to deploy supernatural powers. Indeed, this distinction is crucial to Wade's notion of the "adoxic," the position of fairies "outside the established order of traditional customs, practices, and power relations." This allowed writers to employ them "to reflect and question these establishments… without contradicting, or even directly opposing, such orthodoxies."[46] Human magic-users, by contrast, would remain fully implicated in such regimes.

Wade's idea of the adoxic is undoubtedly a useful intervention in thinking about these beings. While Green is interested in the challenge that belief in fairies posed to societal hierarchies (particularly those based in Christianity), the adoxic tempers this by drawing attention to ways in which writers fully enmeshed in cultural and religious structures could use

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[43] Wade, *Fairies*, 4.
[44] Wade, *Fairies*, 12.
[45] Wade, *Fairies*, 9.
[46] Wade, *Fairies*, 15.

ideas about fairies to carve out distinctly imaginative spaces without risking status or sacrificing their own piety. At the same time, we might wonder if the mere act of conjuring the adoxic produces anti-hegemonic potential, however latent. As a definition for the beings in question, however, the notion of the adoxic is insufficiently specific. Wade's other proposals are not much more productive on this front—he notes, for instance, that audiences are rarely provided insight into fairy's internal thoughts and motivations,[47] but this is a characteristic of many characters across many medieval narrative genres.

The problem of definition, I propose, is also fundamentally a problem of terminology. Even careful critics discussing the poems of Marie and her successors often resort to supplying categorical terms for these creatures that the texts themselves do not: most commonly "fairy" in English and "*fée*" in French, though there are other options (for instance, Dubost refers to the being in *Tydorel* as an "*ondin*."[48]) These terms were not necessarily alien to the Middle Ages; early in his *Mélusine*, Jean d'Arras provides a supernatural taxonomy, distinguishing "*luitons*," "*faes*," and "*bonnes dames qui vont de nuit*."[49] But in the works discussed in this chapter, nouns explicitly identifying otherworld beings as such are virtually nonexistent. The texts of *Guigemar*, *Yonec*, *Tydorel*, *Lanval*, *Graelent,* and *Guingamor* speak only of *dames* and *puceles*, *chevaliers* and *hommes.* The otherworldliness of these characters is constructed contextually, by sets of uncanny signifiers—woodland springs, empty palaces, extraordinary wealth, preternatural knowledge, and above all, a separation from the social, political, and temporal economies in

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[47] Wade, *Fairies*, 15.

[48] Francis Dubost, "Yonec le vengeur et Tydorel le veilleur," in *Et c'est la fin pour quoy sommes ensemble : hommage à Jean Dufournet*, *Vol. I*, ed. Jean-Claude Aubailly, Emmanuèle Baumgartner, Francis Dubost, et al. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1993), 459ff.

[49] Jean d'Arras, *Mélusine ou La Noble Histoire de Lusignan*, ed. Jean-Jacques Vincensini (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2003), 116. Jean's "*luitons*" are nocturnal mischief-makers; the "*bonnes dames*" are a sort of benevolent household spirit; the "*faes*," finally, are beautiful beings that enter romantic liaisons with men while imposing strange taboos upon them.

which the fully human participates. If the *azhdahā* of the previous chapter was a word searching for narrative-biological-historical substance, the strange lovers of Marie's poems are the opposite—beings whose uncanniness coheres in others' inability to distinguish them by a single categorical term.

Some scholars have pointed out the reluctance that these texts evince for naming their supernatural interlopers. Wade, for instance, notes that the Breton-themed *contes* are populated by the "ambiguous figure—neither clearly fairy nor human—whose ultimate indeterminacy works to create an uncanny aesthetic that builds on various other *unheimliche* episodes…" The heroine of *Guigemar* is "in many ways fully human" but "also has certain supernatural associations." For Wade, this ambiguity arises from an incomplete development of textual internal folklore, a "refusal to establish an internal coherence for a narrative's text-world" that opens gaps in the worldbuilding project.[50] Francis Dubost extends this observation to all Marie's supernatural characters: "Tous ses personnages merveilleux sont doubles. Ils présentent tour à tour une face humaine et une face merveilleuse ou fantastique."[51]

Wade is certainly right to point out that "…it seems unlikely that such a lack of a coherent internal folklore would have gone unnoticed by authors such as Chrétien [de Troyes] or Marie de France, or any competent author." His explanation is that this vagueness represents "an authorial strategy intended not only to create complex situations in which a knight could receive the benefits of a supernatural woman and yet still be integrated into the courtly networks of the human world, but also… to add imaginative depth, a certain aesthetic of mystery, to the narrative."[52] Yet Wade here presupposes a dichotomy between the essential "supernatural" nature of certain characters

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[50] Wade, *Fairies*, 25-26.
[51] Dubost, "Motifs," 78.
[52] Wade, *Fairies*, 27.

and an authorial tempering of this nature to achieve certain fictive effects. I argue, rather, that an ambiguous relationship to normative humanity is a fundamental and indeed definitional quality of these beings.

In light of this, I refer to them throughout this chapter as "parahumans." This is a broad term covering literary, mythic, and folkloric beings who display the uncanny combination of certain human qualities—often including speech, reason, sexual compatibility, and physical resemblance—with a deeply alien relationship to quantities such as space and time. This relationship often extends to causality and agency, sometimes via mechanisms glossed (diegetically or otherwise) as magic; these might include shape-shifting, turning invisible, the laying of taboos or curses, or the conjuring of illusions. But these abilities do not detract from their physical substance. They can engender children; their bodies are not ephemeral but rather subject to violence and destruction. When dead, they may be laid in tombs. Indeed, they are so like humans that it may seem wrong to term them anything else; yet they enact an undeniable alterity that may be immediately apparent (as in *Yonec*) or may emerge only in time—as much as three hundred years, in the case of *Guingamor*.

I find parahuman a more useful term than the alternatives (such as *fairy* or *fée*) for a number of reasons. It is intentionally capacious; beings explicitly identified as "fairies" may in turn readily be considered parahuman, alongside others (elves, nixes, *jinn*, *div*, *pari*, *shedim*, *aes sídhe*, *tylwyth teg*, and many more[53]) without collapsing these culturally specific beings into a single hegemonic conception. And crucially, as mentioned above, the poems analyzed in this chapter do not employ any of these loaded terms. Using particular taxonomic categories when

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[53] Some of these—particularly *jinn*—can operate both as parahumans and as spirits (or demons), categories which tend to perform somewhat different functions in belief and narrative even while the same beings are often ascribed to both, with different qualities or capacities (reproductive compatibility with humans, shapeshifting, invisibility, etc.) emphasized accordingly.

they are not invoked by the texts in question risks importing a raft of cultural associations that are not necessarily operative within specific narratives or contexts. The parahuman avoids this issue by insisting on no essential quality other than an intimate alterity vis-à-vis the unmarked "human." Perhaps most importantly, it has no independent literary or imaginative history that might influence perceptions of beings ascribed to it. It is adjectival rather than nominal, and partakes strongly of the uncanny. It alludes also to Gérard Genette's *paratexte*, the threshold ("*seuil*") between text and outer world which constitutes "une zone non seulement de transition, mais de *transaction*,"[54] operating on different time scales from the text,[55] lurking on its margins yet interpenetrating its depths, bringing it into being even as it expands that sense of being enormously.[56] Dwelling as they so often do at points of liminal convergence between cultures, biomes, and/or eras, parahumans interrogate the ways in which borders both define and undermine self-assured ontologies.[57]

While admitting porous conceptual boundaries and cultural specificity, the notion of the parahuman still seeks to identify an axis of comparison that might bring into comparative analysis a wide spectrum of imagined and posited beings. As such, the parahuman helps get beyond Wade's paradox of "indeterminacy." Whether or not a character is explicitly identified as a "fairy," the text's rendering of her as parahuman allows a new range of possibilities.

Nor do we need to reject entirely Wade's notion of fairy "power" (which may in turn be related to Green's invocation of the "numinous.") I contend here that the parahumans of Marie's

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[54] Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), 8.
[55] Genette, *Seuils*, 11-12.
[56] Genette comments also on the paratextual nature of information about an author (such as age or gender), particularly relevant in the case of Marie (for whom this paratextual element and the texts from which it is gleaned constitute the sole evidence of her existence) (Genette, *Seuils*, 12-13).
[57] As Michelle R. Warren writes, "The figure of paradox inhabits all boundary concepts because the line of the limit seeks to institute an absolute difference at the place of most intimate contact between two spaces (or concepts, or peoples, or times, or…) (Warren, *History*, 2).

poems, and those of her successors, possess power precisely through their orthogonal relationship to seemingly inevitable human systems. They often possess all the trappings of "nobility" as a cultural site but exist outside of its sociogenetic determinants. Even more importantly, they participate in time and history but are not subject to it. Parahumans are both past (liminal between nature and culture, possessors of lost knowledge, "missing links") and future (keepers of prophecy, horizons of human becoming). Existing outside of hegemonic temporal regimes, they are Bigfoot and aliens both. Through their agency, the imagined past of medieval narrative comes to stand for something like an alternate future.

Given this power, one of the more curious behaviors of parahumans is their frequent erotic desire for their mundane counterparts. As Green writes, "…fairies most often impinge on the human life world in two ways: by copulating with mortals or by abducting them."[58] Much of this chapter will be devoted to exploring the relationship of human desire to the parahuman; suffice it to state here that eros remains an enduring element of human accounts of the parahumans across cultures and eras.[59]

Otherworlds and Othertimes

Parahumans also inhabit distinct spaces. These are the zones that medievalist scholarship usually refers to as "otherworlds," a term I do not intend to challenge.[60] While my analyses in

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[58] Green, *Elf Queens*, 14.
[59] It is notable that one of the oldest modern alien abduction accounts involves the abductee, Antônio Villas Boas, having sex with an extraterrestrial woman. This "reproductive theme" remains a central fixation of such reports. Indeed, folklorists working on abduction accounts have noted a number of parallels with traditional parahuman folklore: these include a significant amount of attention paid to the passage to and from the supernatural space, often depicted as a subterranean journey via a mound; the extraordinary "skills and powers" of the beings; the experience of "time lapse," occasionally expressed as memory loss; and a blend of positive and negative outcomes for the abductee, who may acquire unusual abilities while suffering physical or psychic wounds. (Thomas E. Bullard, "UFO Abduction Reports: The Supernatural Kidnap Narrative Returns in Technological Guise," *The Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 404 (Apr. – Jun., 1989): 147-170, esp. 156-161.)
[60] See pages 117-118 and 127-128, 458-462, and 484-486.

this chapter focus more on the beings themselves than on their habitats, it is helpful to review

some of the scholarship on these realms, both because they have been a major focus of critical

interest in the texts discussed here, and in order to lay the groundwork for my own approaches to

these parahuman zones when they are encountered by natives of normative space and time. Here

and in the readings that follow, I aim to emphasize the degree to which otherworlds represent

temporal anomalies, recalling the weirded times explored in the first chapter of this dissertation.

At the beginning of her monograph dedicated to "otherworlds," Aisling Byrne notes the

wide variety of places to which the term might refer—"the next world, the world of fairies, an

imaginary fantastical realm, or, less frequently, far-flung corners of the globe such as the

wondrous East or the Antipodes."[61] While her (and my) analyses focus on the second and third

of these usages, the resonances of both mortality and exoticized distance are operative in many

accounts of these sites. Laurence Harf provides a similar catalogue that also notes the ethical

stakes of movement into these spaces, which are "à la fois le monde des fées, le monde des

morts, le monde sauvage ou s'affirment des contre-valeurs."[62] For Wade, this opposition to the

values of the normative world is key to understanding otherworldly spaces as the topographical

counterparts of their inhabitants. For him, the otherworld is "a place of unknowableness, an

adoxic place where the human victims are abandoned to the arbitrariness of the supernatural

sovereign sphere—a place where danger is ever-present, though how and when it may unfold,

and what shape it may take, is left to the imagination."[63] This openness to dramatic occurrences,

according to Byrne, accounts both for much of the literary appeal of these zones and for their

similarities across a range of different texts: "…thematic similarities between otherworld

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[61] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 5.

[62] Laurence Harf, "La Reine ou la Fée: L'Itinéraire du Héros dans les *Lais* de Marie de France," in *Amour et Merveilles: Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995), 81.

[63] Wade, *Fairies*, 83.

narratives can often be accounted for by the fact that the otherworld lends itself to the treatment of certain themes, such as death, gender, authority, and territorial politics."[64]

At the same time, Byrne cautions:

> …the 'otherness' of these worlds is not as secure and absolute as that accorded to the otherworlds of, say, modern fantasy literature. They are 'other' only insofar as they are removed from the actual world the author inhabits and operate in ways that are unfamiliar to the text's readership... This ontological uncertainty is, in some ways, an artistic strength, since it suggests that the distinction between 'this' worldly experience and the otherworldly is not as fixed and as clear as modern critical discourse might suggest.[65]

Byrne is right to question the degree to which medieval texts delineate strong boundaries between the normative world of everyday experience and otherworlds beyond it. Indeed, much as the poems discussed in this chapter avoid designating their parahumans with specific terms, they generally avoid naming otherworld spaces.[66] Only in *Lanval* is there a specific reference to a supernatural realm, the *Avalun* already popularized by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace (discussed in more detail below). Here again a gap opens between Marie's work and her presumed models, since Welsh literature generally has little hesitation about identifying otherworld space as, e.g., *Annwfn*.[67] Perhaps the comparatively contained Welsh cultural sphere could adhere to specific terminology that, in the more cosmopolitan territory of the *langue d'oil*, proved less useful than impressionistic signifiers of the uncanny and otherworldly.[68]

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[64] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 7.

[65] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 12.

[66] Byrne points out that this lack of names for otherworld spaces is a general characteristic of medieval English and French literatures (Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 13). While this is true to an extent, *faerie* and its variants often seem to have some degree of geographical referent; and while *Elfame* is not attested before the early modern period ("Elfame" in *Dictionar o the Scots Leid*, https://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/elfame), the fact that it has a clear Old Norse cognate (*Álfheimr*) is certainly suggestive.

[67] See pages 96 and 117-118, including notes 176-178, for a discussion of this term.

[68] Aisling Byrne discusses some of these issues of terminology (Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 15-16).

But Byrne's analysis displaces some of the crucial stakes that the presence of otherworlds raise within texts. If, as she urges, "the otherworld of medieval culture [is] primarily an *imaginative* (as opposed to an 'imaginary') field, rather than an ontological or ideological one," then its relationship to history is largely accidental or at least incidental. If it cannot be identified as "the place where the real and the natural gives way to the unreal and the supernatural, but instead… [as] a wholly new horizon of expectations *within* the text,"[69] then without resorting to historicist allegorical (or, for that matter, euhemerist) readings, it is hard to grant meaningful and non-theoretical agency to these realms and their inhabitants, as Green insists we must. An alternative position would insist that otherworlds and their inhabitants cannot be mere narrative devices or symbols standing in for a more "real" land or nation. Rather, otherworlds must constitute a distinct, ontologically independent polity, or set of polities. This is not to deny that they can never suggest or gesture towards some historical place or category; only that their irreducibility to any familiar referent is a primary reason why they must be invoked.

Here again, the notion of the parahuman proves helpful. If "otherworlds" are simply those places which parahumans call home, then their distinction from the outside world is likewise porous, unstable, and defined by a close relationality that is nonetheless unable to overcome a fundamental alterity. The degree of this difference may be textually constructed (and indeed, useful for particular narratological projects) without reducing these realms to purely imaginative fantasies.

Viewed this way, a number of key otherworld features come into focus. The immense wealth and quantity of rich materials consistently associated with them and their denizens serve to place these spaces outside human economies, governed by scarcity, social networks, and

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[69] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 21.

(particularly in the Middle Ages), the distance across which precious items often had to travel. But despite lacking such sources of value, these materials continue to communicate luxury and nobility and so remain implicated in the hierarchical structures of this world.

Even more crucial is the relationship of parahuman space to heterochronology. Wade notes that fairy worlds are "divorced from the rules of time and space in the actual world" and "therefore removed from history"—they do not seem to stage the "chronological sequences of events" that histories require. The temporal relationship between human worlds and otherworlds is thus antagonistic: "Fairies exist in fictive possible worlds where time often operates differently from that of the actual world, and for this reason fairies have a tendency to wreak havoc on historical narrative, on any narrative reconstructing states of the actual world—any narrative chronologically structured." Wade offers the example of Arthur's return, which hangs over insular history as a fictive but no less potent threat: "What happens to the primacy of the narrative's linear time when it is invaded by a nonlinear or otherwise supernatural time?"[70] In Wade's reading, this "supernatural time" is prone to leak out from otherworlds and infect ostensibly human space-times that lie in contact with them. Thus he positions the Arthurian world of Chrétien de Troyes's romances as "freed from the constraints of history," a zone in which time "operates cyclically," without context or even past.[71]

Without veering into a deep analysis of Chrétien's texts, I would only suggest that they are in fact not as blithely atemporal as Wade and others suggest; that the ultimate tragedy of Arthur's court looms over and profoundly inflects their narratives, as their ready incorporation into the teleological Vulgate Cycle and its descendants testifies. Furthermore, their positioning as "past" relative to their readership is, like the similar historical siting of Marie's poems, a

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[70] Wade, *Fairies*, 56.
[71] Wade, *Fairies*, 57.

meaningful choice. The heterochronic relation of human and parahuman worlds is indeed destabilizing, but this influence works both ways; as texts like *Guigemar* and *Yonec* indicate, otherworlds are as vulnerable to invasions of normative chronology as the reverse. And it is impossible to analyze this relationship without noting that the narratives in which this conflict comes to the fore are almost always set in a distant past.

For Green, "displacement, both temporal and geographical" is a strategy medieval writers employ to mediate their "uneasiness" with fairies and similar beings. "Thus," he writes, "fairy romances generally employ a once-upon-a-time (*jadis*) setting that helps insulate them from contemporary censure."[72] At the same time, he notes that such narratives did not belong solely to the past, and that accounts of parahumans were regularly situated in the author's present or near-present settings.[73] This suggests either that this "contemporary censure" was only spottily applied, or that parahumans by their very nature are "insulated" from the pressures of the here-and-now. It is thus perhaps more productive to see the long-ago setting as imbuing, rather than draining, importance from otherworld narratives, by inserting them into a past from which they could continually operate as sources of meaning and legitimation. Conversely, when parahumans appear in accounts of the present, they bring with them this link to antiquity, acting as vectors for the heterochronic infection that Wade posits.

Yet there is an imbalance here: parahumans are imbued with a pastness, but it is a pastness of this world, not of theirs. Lacking the markers of identity and affiliation that tied medieval subjects to particular historical narratives, the supernatural characters of the tales discussed here become untethered from chronological imperatives. Otherworlds' temporal alterity is in fact tied to their missing or illegible history. The disjunctions that open between

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[72] Green, *Elf Queens*, 66-67.
[73] Green, *Elf Queens*, 83.

their times and those of the human world are rooted in the fact that the latter plays host to history together with all its parasites and commensals—progress and decline, ethnic identity and colonialism, nostalgia and forgetting. Whereas otherworlds are opaque to all these modes of historical understanding, except insofar as they seduce certain humans away from normative temporal hegemonies.

Loving Otherness

All six texts explored in this chapter insist on the marvelous rarity of sexual contact between humans and parahumans. The latter may be wished for, but they are never expected (perhaps another flaw in Wace's plan for fairy tourism); their appearances profoundly alter the lives of their human lovers. But the poems also insist that these humans themselves are often unusual, outsiders to the social and reproductive norms of their societies. They possess a distance from their environments, one which can verge on the quality recognized in modern critical terms as queerness. Drawn into intimate encounters with the inhabitants of otherworlds through their own otherness, these men and women become even more indelibly marked.

To the extent that otherworlds are realms of escape, they are gendered. As Barbara Fass Leavy writes, "Both men and women dream of bowers of bliss in which they may evade the human condition, but women flee not only the plight of generalized humanity but also a specific gender-based predicament as the second sex in a world dominated by men."[74] As interested as the poems discussed here—particularly those known to have been composed by a woman—are in this gendered imbalance, they also persistently note that men's position in sociopolitical hegemonies is dependent on ongoing performances of normativity. When these falter, the men in question are

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[74] Barbara Fass Leavy, *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender* (New York: NYU Press, 1994), 76.

likewise vulnerable to the attractions of the parahuman. In this sense, otherworlds might also be associated with the experience of discrimination and the position of the subaltern in a hierarchical society more broadly.

Laurence Harf writes of Marie's tales that "Le héros est d'emblée presenté comme étrange, différent. L'alterité revêt diverses formes mais la conséquence en est toujours identique: il se trouve en situation d'exclusion."[75] Yet because these narratives all hinge on sexual encounters, this strangeness/difference lends itself readily to being read in terms of sexuality. Nor is this anachronistic; in *Lanval* the hero is directly accused of homosexuality, which was very much a matter of medieval concern and debate. In his *De Planctu Naturae*, Marie's contemporary Alain de Lille positioned same-sex attraction as the epitome of man's corruption of divine Nature;[76] and, as Harf notes, this ongoing cultural discourse culminated in Canon 11 of the Third Lateran Council of 1179, according to which priests who engaged in sodomy were to be removed from office, and laymen were to be excommunicated.[77]

Against this background, attraction to parahumans seems to offer an alternate sexuality that, while occasionally constituting adultery, retains the potential for reproduction and so is not *contra naturam*. While the ostensibly heterosexual unions that result may be said to efface the initial state of queerness, Rupert T. Pickens suggests that Marie's poetics consistently situate the "sexually ambiguous body"—both self-inscribed and constituted through supernatural encounters—"as both object and purveyor of fruitful, meaningful discourse."[78] In the poems discussed here, this discourse figures its own emergence from the intimate relations of societal

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[75] Harf, "La Reine," 81.
[76] Alain de Lille, *"The Plaint of Nature" (De Planctu Naturae)*, in *Literary Works: Alain of Lille*, ed. and trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library), 2013), 21-218.
[77] Harf, "La Reine," 89.
[78] Rupert T. Pickens, "Marie de France and the Body Poetic," in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 135.

outsiders and parahumans. These latter may, themselves, inhabit a kind of queerness with relations to their own worlds. "Il est intéressant de noter," Andrzej Dziedzic observes, "que les êtres de l'Autre-Monde qui interviennent sont, eux aussi, seuls et aliénés. Le monde de l'autre côté constitue pour eux le lieu d'emprisonnement et de malheur et l'espoir vient de ce côté-ci de la mer."[79] This reflexivity, particularly prominent in *Guigemar* and *Yonec*, further emphasizes the degree to which the otherness encountered in these texts is intimate and relational while still irreducible to direct allegory. Indeed, it suggests a pre-existent parahuman quality within those who are themselves drawn towards and into otherworlds.

What seems to occur, in these tales of erotic transactions between worlds, is a kind of sexual sorting. Men whose strangeness is unreconcilable to the reproductive norms of their society either abandon their native lands in favor of another world (as Lanval, Graelent, and Guingamor do) or seek out an otherworldly partner whose strangeness commingles with and ultimately mitigates their own (as Guigemar does). Women, by contrast, find themselves bearing the parahuman into the heart of hitherto unmarked genealogies. The illicit but thoroughly validated desires of Yonec's mother instigate a cycle of revenge that ends with Muldumarec's kingdom tamed to normative geography and ruled by a lord of mixed blood.

The violence that so often accompanies these relationships draws attention both to the narrative intensity inherent to the parahuman break into the normative world, and to the complexities of agency that result. In the medieval as in the modern world, sexual liaisons and fatal struggles are political acts. They confront alterity and seek to incorporate, exclude, tame, or destroy it. As such, their valences in a given society change depending on the actors involved. Medieval texts portray sex and violence occurring between diverse sets of men and women,

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[79] Andrzej Dziedzic, "L'Espace Surnaturel dans les *Lais* de Marie de France," *Aevum*, Anno 69, Fasc. 2 (maggio-agosto 1995): 398.

nobles and commoners, locals and foreigners. Any depicted encounter might be read differently depending on the interaction amongst these signifiers—the entire plot of the romance *Floire et Blanchefloire*, for instance, can be read as a continuous modulation amongst categories of difference and sameness, before they resolve into matrimony.[80] Yet our ability to understand these political nuances, and their implications, is hindered by our temporal and cultural distance from the context of their production.

Dealings with parahumans in some ways foreground our cultural maladroitness vis-à-vis medieval texts. As this introduction has insisted, medieval audiences seem to have approached these beings and their realms differently than we tend to, seeing them not as purely fantastical products of the imagination but rather as expressions of social, cultural, and temporal otherness that once were and may yet be. Yet I also argue that precisely because they void the complexly interlocking political identities that other figures (the "Saracen princess," say) bring to their narratives, supernatural characters are, in some ways, more inviting of modern readers and readings. And since the consequences of their liaisons are often to reveal the parahuman natures of their consorts from this world, they might be said to act as keys into otherwise occluded medieval subjectivities.

The six texts discussed below—Marie's *Guigemar*, *Yonec*, and *Lanval*, together with the anonymous *Tydorel*, *Graelent*, and *Guingamor*—have invited voluminous critical attention. This is both because they stand out from the corpus in their own terms (among Marie's poems, the aforementioned are three of the four longest), and because they possess dense intertextuality that invites comparative analysis. This is not to presuppose a reductive and false dichotomy between

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[80] Jean-Luc Leclanche, ed., *Le conte de Floire et Blancheflor* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1983).

"magical" and "realistic" narratives in the "Breton *lai*" corpus;[81] such a categorical hierarchy almost certainly would not have been operative in Marie's day. Rather, it is to recognize that within these tales, a tight and coherent cluster of shared motifs are worked through in an array of different variations.[82]

As such, there are many possible ways to group these poems for analytical purposes. My approach has been to categorize them based on the outcome of the romantic encounter. In "Hybrid Worlds: *Guigemar*, *Yonec*, & *Tydorel*," humans and parahumans form relationships or produce offspring whose hybrid natures become the subjects of dramas of identity within this world. In "Lovers Occulted: *Lanval*, *Graelent, & Guingamor*," by contrast, men abandon mundane realms for an obscured horizon of parahuman possibility. This second grouping in particular is not original to this study; numerous previous commentators have remarked on the connections amongst these poems and established schemes for relating them chronologically and thematically. The first grouping is somewhat more idiosyncratic, though as the only examples in the corpus of a relationship between a human woman and supernatural man, *Yonec* and *Tydorel* have been linked before; Laurence Harf-Lancner connects them to the Mélusine legends,[83] while Jean-Claude Aubailly's *La Fée et le Chevalier* analyzes *Yonec* and *Tydorel* under a single chapter ("*L'Animus et le Puer aeternus*"—as this title suggests, Aubailly's densely Jungian hermeneutic readings are not particularly relevant to my discussions of these works).[84]

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[81] R. B. Green, "The Fusion of magic and realism in two lays of Marie de France," *Neophilologus* 59, no. 3 (1974): 324.

[82] It might also be pointed out that these are not the *only* texts that might be included in such an analysis. The anonymous *Desiré*, for instance, is likewise the tale of a man's relationship with a supernatural woman who bears him children, and his (ultimately successful) quest to integrate his family into the sociopolitical order while he and his lover occult themselves. As this summary makes clear, it touches on a number of key themes to this chapter, and its absence here is not to suggest any fundamental analytical divide between it and these six works.

[83] Harf-Lancner, *Fées,* 243

[84] Jean-Claude Aubailly, *La fée et le chevalier: essai de mythanalyse de quelques lais féeriques des XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1986).

Rather than downplaying or ignoring the otherworldly identity of a given character or locale, or allegorizing parahumans as transparent representations of some other *otherness* (generally mystical indigenes or exoticized foreigners), my arguments here emphasize both the alterity of the otherworldly lovers in these poems, and the importance of their setting in the past. I suggest that these qualities are both central to these texts, and linked. By summoning parahumans into the thick of sociocultural genealogies, Marie and her successors explore the pressures of defiantly strange lands and peoples upon history, and so upon the present. To love the parahuman in these texts is to love an unknowable temporal otherness that is always being lost, either rapidly colonized into the legibility of the present, or irrevocably sundered from it.

Lastly, it is impossible to read these stories in 2020 without noting that they are deeply interested in the ethics of sexual relationships. While this thread will be taken up again in the conclusion, I will only note here that every violation of consent committed by human men in these *lais* is punished, including via some of the most complex revenge schemes depicted in all the vendetta-obsessed literature of medieval Europe. In this aspect too, while only three of these six poems were definitely written by a women, the others seem indebted to at least this modicum of feminist literary ethics.

Part I.

Hybrid Worlds: *Guigemar*, *Yonec*, and *Tydorel*

In the text known as the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, a historical compilation dating to the second half of the seventh century, there appears a startling account of the Frankish ruling family's origins. "*Fertur, super litore maris aestatis tempore Chlodeo cum uxore resedens, meridiae uxor ad mare labandum vadens, bistea Neptuni Quinotauri similis eam adpetisset. Cumque in continuo aut a bistea aut a viro fuisset concepta, peperit filium nomen Meroveum, per co regis Francorum post vocantur Merohingii.*"[85] (It is said that while Chlodio was staying on the seashore during the summertime with his wife, at noon his wife went into the sea to bathe, and a beast of Neptune, resembling the Quinotaur, desired her. And so at once either by the beast or the man [or: by both the beast and the man], she became pregnant, and gave birth to a son named Merovech, after whom the kings of the Franks were later called the Merovingians.")

Alexander Callander Murray has convincingly argued that this tale represents not the vestiges of Germanic paganism but rather the etymological interests of Latinate learned culture in seventh-century Gaul. Interpreting the name *Merovech* as meaning something like "sea-beast" or "sea-bull," the chronicler or one of his sources borrowed the association of Neptune, cattle, and sexually vulnerable royal women from the legend of Pasiphaë and the Minotaur, and used it to provide a compelling supernatural gloss on the ruling dynasty's name. Whether this encoded a

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[85] Societas Aperiendis Fontibus, ed., *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Liber III*, in *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum, Tomus II: Fredegarii et Aliorum Chronica. Vitae Sanctorum* (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1888), 95.

view of the Merovingians as ancestrally heroic or monstrous is less clear, though Murray inclines toward the former view.[86]

Either way, that a historian could posit a non-human progenitor for the royal dynasty—and a fairly recent one, if Merovech is assigned his traditional dates in the mid-fifth century—suggests a medieval openness to imagining radical hybridity.[87] While *Fredegar* predates Marie by roughly half a millennium, there were plenty of intervening examples. Merlin, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, was the child of a human woman and a parahuman father, seemingly an incubus. Richard Firth Green argues that this legend greatly amplified both the popularity of this motif and the serious attention granted to it by medieval scholars.[88] Walter Map, whose *De Nugis Curialium* ("Courtiers' Trifles") probably dates from the decades after Marie's oeuvre, comments negatively on such unions: "*Audiuimus demones incubus et succubus, et concubitus eorum periculosos: heredes autem eorem aut sobolem felici fine beatam in antiquis historiis aut raro aut nunquam legimus*"[89] ("We have heard of incubus and succubus demons, and the dangers of having sex with them; moreover, in ancient histories we have seldom if ever read that such heirs or offspring are blessed with reaching a happy end.") As Juliette Wood points out, Map seems to have been aware that the Plantagenets in whose court he served were popularly

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[86] Alexander Callander Murray, "*Post vocantur Merohingii*: Fredegar, Merovech, and 'Sacral Kingship,'" in *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History: Essays presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. Alexander Callander Murray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 121-152.

[87] Interestingly, even the wildly eccentric reading of this legend proposed by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, and adopted by Dan Brown for *The Da Vinci Code*—that Merovech's aquatic father is not merely a fish but rather *ΙΧΘΥΣ*, a symbol of the Merovingian descent from Jesus Christ—interprets it as a claim of numinous and not (simply or entirely) human ancestry. Their sensationalist interpretation in fact may point to a primary reason why medieval Christian audiences were so receptive to the idea of parahuman hybridity; intense interest in elucidating Jesus' combined human and divine natures may well have provoked speculation on the stakes of other mixed identities. Certainly, this connection is suggested by the Annunciation-like scene in which Muldumarec tells his human lover that she will bear a son (Marie de France, *Yonec*, in *Lais de Marie de France*, ed. and trans. Alexandre Micha, (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 208 (lines 327-332)). At the same time, the existence of parallel debates in cultures that did not share these concerns over Jesus (such as the Muslim world) suggests additional factors at play.

[88] Green, *Elf Queens*, 85.

[89] Map, *De Nugis,* 77.

associated with fairy ancestors.[90] This tale found literary expression in the thirteenth century romance *Richard Coer de Lyon*, in which Richard I of England's mother, Aliénor d'Aquitaine—a figure who had died barely fifty years before the text's composition—was presented as a being of uncertain parahuman status named Cassodorien, who seems to combine both devilish and fairy qualities.[91]

In his discussion of this trope, Richard Firth Green notes that "the overt sexuality of fairies" and "their fecundity" proved particularly difficult for learned commentators of the medieval era to accept. Despite elaborate and often absurdly comical mechanisms to describe fairy simulation of genitalia and appropriation of semen, medieval churchmen like William of Auvergne wrestled with how such "self-serving sensuality" could be reconciled with the torment of those eternally exiled from God. Yet this conundrum seems to have proved far more of a difficulty for clerical intellectuals than it was for wider medieval audiences, for whom it remained an enduring facet of belief about relations between this and other worlds. Green, for example, cites trial records from 1308 in which the defendant was accused of being the child of a fairy.[92]

The titular figures of *Yonec* and *Tydorel*, then, exist in a cultural milieu that entertains the possibility of partial nonhuman parentage without normalizing it. While no children are born to the central couple of *Guigemar* within the scope of the text, their climactic union gestures towards future social productivity. Something extraordinary adheres to the offspring of such unions, even if, as James Wade points out, the degree of alterity present in these children can vary widely from text to text. Some seem fully human, like the hero of *Le Bel Inconnu*; others,

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[90] Juliette Wood, "The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales," *Folklore* 103, no. 1 (1992): 58.
[91] Wade, *Fairies*, 36-37. The sinister mythology that sprang up around Queen Aliénor is discussed in Robert L. Chapman, "A Note on the Demon Queen Eleanor," *Modern Language Notes* 70, no. 6 (Jun. 1955): 393-396.
[92] Green, *Elf Queens*, 57-59.

fully parahuman; others blend qualities of both lineages.[93] But all are destined to narratives that hinge on their belated discovery of their otherworldly ancestry, and the dramatic, often bloody consequences of this revelation.

Some critics have referred to the union of humans and parahumans as "miscegenation."[94] This is a provocative assessment, since most analyses of these relationships have focused instead on the problem of their illegitimacy. Francis Dubost, for instance, points out that "Le mythe de la naissance fabuleuse apportait bien une aura héroique et surnaturelle au lignage des grandes familles aristocratiques. Mais comme la naissance fabuleuse est aussi, la plupart du temps, une naissance illégitime, le même detour mythique introduisait également la souillure de la bâtardise."[95] This stain is quite different from that invoked by the concept of miscegenation, a word coined by pamphleteering white supremacists in 1863, in the specific context of the Civil War and the struggle over Black liberation in the United States.[96] But in taking parahuman difference seriously, it is important likewise to take seriously the implications of having this difference replace the legible identities encoded within known, human ancestry.

Nonhuman blood would seem to be a serious detriment in an era when lineage was becoming an aristocratic obsession. Gabrielle Spiegel notes that "[g]enealogy intrudes into historical narrative at precisely the time when noble families in France were beginning to organize themselves into vertical structures based on agnatic consanguinity, to take the form, in other words, of *lignages*." Genealogies "were expressions of social memory,"[97] and as such

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[93] Wade, *Fairies*, 30.

[94] E.g., McLoone, "Strange Bedfellows: Politics, Miscegenation, and *Translatio* in Two Lays of Lanval"; Wade, *Fairies*, 28.

[95] Dubost, "Yonec," 466.

[96] Anonymous [David Goodman Croly and George Wakeman], *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro* (New York: H. Dexter, Hamilton & Co, 1863).

[97] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 104.

activated an imagined past within the sexual and legal dramas of the present. "On a deeper level, genealogy functioned to secularize time by grounding it in biology, transforming the connection between past and present into a real one, seminally imparted from generation to generation." It therefore "suggested the human process of procreation and filiation as a metaphor for historical change."[98] Against this sociocultural background, Kinoshita characterizes the situation depicted in *Yonec* and *Tydorel* as "feudal society's worst nightmare: an illegitimate child passed off as [the] husband's son and heir—a scenario so explosive that… romance writers typically refused to touch it."[99] Yet Daisy Delogu suggests that the fantastically hybrid ancestries of important lineages—such as the House of Lusignan, descended from the serpentine fairy Mélusine—could self-consciously reflect the blend of (ostensibly factual) chronicle and (openly marvelous) romance that characterized much medieval writing about the past. In the resultant narratives, history and fiction "coexisted and mingled in ways that modern critical readers might find inappropriate," but that were central to medieval conceptions of origins.[100] To site such foundational moments along borders (between *historia* and *fabula*, human and parahuman, civilization and wilderness…) was to acknowledge both the fecundity of such liminal zones and their destabilizing potential.

Each of the poems discussed below takes a unique approach to the combination of wonder and horror conjured by the sexual union of humans and parahumans. By exploring and exploding the boundaries between these categories, *Guigemar* establishes a set of interpretive practices that position love for alterity as a particular erotic attitude to time and space. In *Yonec*, the deep otherness of the supernatural lover, as much a bird of prey as he is an otherworldly

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[98] Spiegel, *Past as Text*, 107-108.
[99] Kinoshita, *Boundaries,* 118.
[100] Daisy Delogu, "Jean d'Arras Makes History: Political Legitimacy and the Roman de Mélusine," *Dalhousie French Studies* 80 (Fall 2007): 20.

prince, implants in his offspring a hereditary time bomb in narrative form. The climactic

detonation of this secret history has the power to reconfigure political geographies along the

border between this world and another. Finally, *Tydorel* depicts genetic parahumanity as a latent

disease which fiction can palliate but nothing can cure. Taken together, these tales wonder

provocatively about the costs of reconciling modes of being defined by their difference.

1. Parallel Parahumans in *Guigemar*

A young man with no interest in women injures himself badly while hunting a strange

hermaphroditic creature. In a hallucinatory exchange, this beast sends him on a quest to find the

woman who can cure him through her love. An unpiloted ship brings the dying man to a walled

fortress in a nameless country, where an absent lord keeps his wife imprisoned. She heals the

stranger, and they fall in love. When the lord returns and discovers the affair, he banishes the

young man, but not before the lovers pledge themselves to one another with knots that only the

other can untie. Separated, they pine for one another, until the woman discovers that she is

miraculously able to break free from her prison. Taking the same unpiloted ship, she is conveyed

to a land bordering her lover's kingdom. There, the knot protects her from the local lord's

rapacious advances. When her lover visits this land to take part in a competition, he finds the

woman, and they undo the knots by which each had bound the other. The local lord attempts

again to take the woman for himself, but dies in the ensuing battle. At last, the lovers are

reunited.

In the Harley 978 manuscript that contains all of Marie's poems ostensibly based on Breton

lais, *Guigemar* is the first tale after the general prologue. Since none of the (admittedly

speculative) chronological schemes for these works make it the first to be composed,[101] its placement raises the question of how it might function as an introductory narrative for the corpus as a whole. By emphasizing a number of temporal and geographical features that place our world in relation to another one, the text introduces the terms on which the parahuman will operate in subsequent tales. The supernatural becomes a means of conveyance, both literal and narrative, between otherwise hermetically separate realms. The undertaking of these journeys is mapped onto the travails of a couple whose estrangement from their societies is figured as parahuman alterity. Only in its satisfyingly uncomplicated conclusion does *Guigemar* establish expectations that subsequent tales will significantly undermine.

Encountering the Ancient

From the poem's beginning onward, Marie devotes close attention to both geographical and chronological setting—"*Vos mosterai une aventure / Ki en Bretaigne la Menur / Avint al tens ancïenur*"[102] ("I will present to you an adventure / That in Lesser Britain [Brittany] / Occurred in ancient times.") Vague as this "*tens ancïenur*" may seem, Marie's familiarity with Wace (demonstrated most clearly in *Lanval*) suggests that she would have known that *Bretaigne la Menur* was a historical phenomenon, established—in one of the few moments of legendary British history with a definite basis in fact—by settlers from (Great) Britain, beginning in the late fourth century CE.[103] While certainly still "ancient" to a twelfth-century audience, this horizon between what we now consider the classical and early medieval was legible as the site of emergence for many salient sociopolitical identities of their own era. It is the same period as the

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[101] See Burgess, *The Lays*, 1-34, for a summary of several dating schemes and his own.
[102] Marie, *Guigemar,* 36 (lines 24-27).
[103] Before then, it was—again, both in literary sources and according to modern scholarly assessments—*Armorica*, "Upon-the-Sea."

anecdote of Merovech's otherworldly conception from *Fredegar* discussed above. The *Cerdicingas*, the Royal House of Wessex—which had united the Kingdom of England and, through intermarriage with the ducal line of Normandy, resulted in the legitimacy of first the Norman and then the Angevin monarchs—traced its advent to the eponymous Cerdic[104] in the early sixth century. The legendary founder of the Scottish Kingdom, Fergus Mòr Mac Earca, was likewise conceived of as a rough contemporary. In other words, the "ancient times" in which Marie sets her tale are long gone enough to acquire a mythic veneer, without losing clear connections to legible late twelfth century identities.[105]

This sense of continuity is emphasized by the list of lands in which the young Guigemar performs his peerless deeds: *Flaundres, Lorreine, Burguine, Angou*, and *Gascuine*.[106] Rather than fanciful or long-lost kingdoms, these duchies and counties very much belonged to the political geography of Marie's world. And these clearly-named and recognizable polities contrast sharply with the land to which the uncrewed ship conveys Guigemar. As he is borne across the waves, the narrator comments, "*Ainz la vesprë ariverat / La ou sa guarisun avrat, / Desuz une antive cité / Ki esteit chief de cel regné*"[107] ("Before evening he will arrive / there where his healing will be, / before an antique city / which was capital of that kingdom.") In contrast to the earlier list of identifiable regions, "*cel regné*" is intriguingly vague. The description of the city as

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[104] To modern philologists, this is transparently a Brittonic name, *Ceredig* or *Caradoc* ("Cherished," attested as far back as the Caratacus of the Catevallauni who resisted the Claudian Invasion of Britain), with the implication that the early kings of Wessex may not have exclusively (or even significantly?) associated with Germanic culture until some generations later. There is no indication that medieval commentators noticed this etymological disjuncture; on the other hand, its survival in the record may suggest a general understanding that identities in this period were unfixed, fluid, and subject to intervention by outside influences, from this world and perhaps beyond.

[105] It might be argued that given the medieval readiness to trace genealogical lines back to heroes of the Trojan War, biblical figures, and Adam himself, this is a false distinction. But these more ancient lineages, while important, were universal properties—virtually all European royal lines claimed Trojan descent. In fact, this myth of common origin might be said to have necessitated a more recent age of differentiation into the legibly distinct proto-ethnonational identities of the medieval era. The centuries around the collapse of Roman centralized government in the West, by and large, came to fulfill this function.

[106] Marie, *Guigemar*, 36 (lines 51-54).

[107] Marie, *Guigemar*, 44 (lines 205-208).

"*antive*" both echoes the "*tens ancïenur*" of the poem's general setting and seems to predate it, embedding an unnamed antiquity into the tale and suggesting that Guigemar's voyage has somehow brought him back in time.[108]

This geographical coyness continues; when Guigemar introduces himself to the lady, he clearly states his origin ("*De Bretaine la Menur fui*," "I am from Brittany") and all but asks her to identify where they now are ("*Ne sai u jeo sui arivez, / Coment ad nun ceste citez*,"[109] "I don't know where I have arrived, / what this city is called"—only editor's punctuation prevents this second line from being read as a question.) But she can only describe her country relationally ("*Ceste cité est mun seignur, / E la cuntree tut entur*"[110] ("This city belongs to my lord, / as does the land all around.") Rather than clarifying Guigemar's confusion, the lady can only convey to him the facts of seignorial possession, as if any specific locational history has been forgotten.

As he falls in love, Guigemar finds this amnesia extending to his own homeland: "*Mais Amur l'ot feru al vif; / Ja ert sis quors en grant estrif, / Kar la dame l'ad si nafré, / Tut ad sun païs ublié*"[111] ("But Love had struck him to the quick; / already his heart was in great anguish, / for the lady had so wounded him / he had completely forgotten his country.") While Guigemar's "forgetting" of his country may be no more than rhetorical—he does remember it easily enough, when the time comes—in the context it is an unsettling development. He has forgotten a named and mapped place in favor of somewhere unmoored from geography and chronology (except insofar as it possesses vague signifiers of distance and antiquity). This displacement is emphasized later when he hesitates to reveal his love to the lady, "*Pur ceo qu'il ert d'estrange*

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[108] The Latinate allusions in the description of the ship's bed and the mural of Venus (both discussed below), together with the similarity of the woman's general situation to Greco-Roman mythological heroines such as Danaë, raises the intriguing possibility that this past may be specifically envisioned as the classical world.
[109] Marie, *Guigemar*, 50 (lines 315 and 331-332).
[110] Marie, *Guigemar*, 52 (lines 339-340).
[111] Marie, *Guigemar*, 54 (lines 379-382).

tere"[112] ("since he was from a strange land.") The immediate sense seems to be that since he is not native, the lady would have the power to exile him if he offended her; and *estrange* can mean simply "foreign" as well as "bizarre." But the anonymizing, blurring, and distancing of his homeland, once so carefully situated, hardly seems accidental. When Guigemar returns to Brittany, it takes a while for the text to recall where exactly this is. His landing spot "*Asez iert pres de sa cuntree*" ("was fairly close to his country"); eleven lines later comes a reference to "*sun païs*" ("his land"); only eight lines after that does the proper name finally return ("*Par Breitaine veit la novele*," "The news traveled throughout Brittany.")[113] While normative geography is thus recuperated, and the lovers' reunion is set within its boundaries, the poem's modulation between Guigemar's native lands and his lady's unnamable country destabilizes the solidity of territorial identity. And by situating this encounter between known and unknown regions within a distant but still identifiable "*tens ancïenur*," Marie both relegates the boundary-crossing adventure to the past and insists that its stakes remain activated in her present.

The Stag and the Ship

In order to effect communication between the lovers' sundered realms, the poem employs a pair of supernatural entities, one organic and one artificial: a white hermaphroditic hind/stag, and an unpiloted ship. The ordeal of Guigemar's encounter with these—and his lady's subsequent experience with the ship—both drives the engine of the plot and suggests mechanisms by which the marvelous bridges the hero's Brittany and his lover's antique otherworld.

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[112] Marie, *Guigemar,* 58 (line 478).
[113] Marie, *Guigemar*, 66 (lines 632, 643, and 651).

Guigemar encounters the fateful beast while out hunting[114]: "*En l'espeise d'un grant buissun / Vit une bise od un foün; / Tute fu blaunche cele beste, / Perches de cerf out en la teste*"[115] ("In the thickness of a great bramble, / he saw a hind and a faun. / This beast was entirely white, / It had a stag's antlers on its head.") In considering these immediately obvious uncanny characteristics, there is no need for recourse to "Celtic mythology" or the like. White (leucistic) specimens of *Cervus elaphus* are real (if rare) animals, as are horned does,[116]. The combination of these two unusual traits certainly emphasizes the marvelous nature of the beast, though only its third wondrous characteristic—its capacity for prophetic speech—is truly supernatural.

Critics have wrestled with the importance of this creature's combination of male and female traits.[117] Certainly the suggestion of sexual ambiguity may echo Guigemar's avowed disinterest in women, an implication heightened by the nature of the accident he suffers when he attempts to slay the anomalous animal:

> *La seete resort ariere,*
> *Guigemar fiert en tel maniere,*
> *En la quisse desk'al cheval,*
> *Ke tost l'estuet descendre aval:*
> *A terre chiet sur l'erbe drue*
> *Delez la bise k'out ferue.*[118]

> (The arrow bounced back, / struck Guigemar in such a way, / into the thigh as deep as his horse, / that he was forced to fall straight down. / He fell to the earth, upon the thick grass, / beside the hind that he had struck.)

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[114] The classic study of the medieval metaphorical complex linking the stag hunt to various forms of desire is Marcelle Thiébaux, *The Stag of Love: The Chase in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974). Thiébaux, however, does not discuss the *lai* corpus.

[115] Marie, 38 (lines 89-92).

[116] These are in fact said to be "relatively common" amongst both roe and red deer (George B. Wislocki, "Antlers in Female Deer, with a Report of Three Cases in Odocoileus," *Journal of Mammalogy* 35, no. 4 (Nov., 1954): 486.)

[117] A number of approaches are summarized in Leslie C. Brook, "Guigemar and the White Hind," *Medium Ævum* 56, no. 1 (1987): 94-101 (particularly 96-97); though Brook's invocation of "Neolithic stag deities" does not inspire confidence.

[118] Marie, *Guigemar*, 38-40 (lines 97-102).

Being penetrated in the thigh suggests a loss of virginity (in a passive, feminized sense) as well as a loss of fertility. The wound might be said to medicalize Guigemar's failure to reproduce. And the confused agency of the injury—the arrow is shot from the knight's bow, but bounces back with shocking force from its target[119]—serves to implicate the young man in his own suffering while also implying his entanglement in an event beyond his control. Throughout this scene, there is a sense of events spiraling out of the hero's grasp, pulling him towards a new reality in which his armed prowess counts for little (and, the rebounding arrow suggests, may in fact be to his detriment).

The disorientation is only heightened when the wounded animal begins to speak.

> *La bise, ki nafree esteit,*
> *Anguissuse ert, si se plaineit.*
> *Aprés parla en itel guise:*
> *"Oï! Lase! Jo sui ocise!*
> *E tu, vassal, ki m'as nafree,*
> *Tel seit la tue destinee:*
> *Jamais n'aies tu medecine,*
> *Ne par herbe, ne par racine!*
> *Ne par mire, ne par poisun*
> *N'avras tu jamés garisun*
> *De la plaie k'as en la quisse,*
> *De si ke cele te guarisse*
> *Ki suffera pur tue amur*
> *Issi grant peine e tel dolur*
> *K'unkes femme taunt ne suffri,*
> *E tu referas taunt pur li;*
> *Dunt tuit cil s'esmerveillerunt*
> *Ki aiment e amé avrunt*
> *U ki pois amerunt après.*[120]

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[119] There is some difficulty as to where, exactly, the arrow bounces from—the word *esclot* means "hoof," but even leaving aside the difficulty of shooting a deer in the hoof, such a blow seems unlikely to cause a fatal wound. Critics and translators have generally opted to understand this as "forehead," unsatisfying as this is (Dubost, "Motifs," 74-75)

[120] Marie, *Guigemar,* 40 (lines 103-121).

(The hind, who was wounded, / was in anguish, and so lamented; / then spoke in this way: / "Listen! Alas! I am slain, / and you, young knight, who have wounded me, / such will be your destiny: / never will you have remedy, / neither by herb, nor by root, / neither by doctor, nor by concoction; / never will you be healed / of the wound you have in the thigh, / until she might heal you; / she who will suffer for your love / such great pain and such sorrow / as never woman suffered so, / and you will in turn do the same for her, / on account of which all will marvel, / who love and will have loved / or who might love in the future.)

As parallel incidents discussed in previous chapters suggest,[121] the fantasy of human-animal communication is one of access to alternate subjectivities, conveyed in both narrative-historical and affective terms (and augmented in this case by a gender-queered component). Isolated as he is in the woodlands, it is unclear if Guigemar understands his victim because it has begun speaking his language or if he has been granted miraculous understanding of its tongue. Either way, the previously autonomous knight becomes enmeshed in a set of new relations to two beings—the deer and the yet-unknown woman (here only vaguely glimpsed as "*cele*," "she, that (female) one," or *li*, "her"). While the lady's parahuman affiliations will manifest later in the poem, the hind arguably borders on this category itself: it can speak, experience pain in remarkably human terms, and its speech combines the magical properties of both prophecy and curse. It imposes upon Guigemar a term to his suffering that in turn involves such acute anguish that it will cause people to marvel ("*s'esmerveillerunt*")—to experience a break with their normative experience of reality. And with this verb's future-tense conjugation, the deer's speech breaks into time-bending paradox. The experience of Guigemar and his lady will reverberate not only throughout their own time and time to come, but also into a retrospective future-past. Stacking conjugations of *amer*—first present (*aiment*), then future perfect (*avrunt amé*), then simple future (*amerunt*)—the hind suggests that the narrative into which Guigemar is about to

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[121] See, e.g., pages 75, 81ff., and 259.

launch will have the ability to alter the perceptions of all lovers, including those who cannot yet

know themselves to be such (*amerunt*) and, most dizzyingly, those who cannot yet know that

they *will have* been such (*amé avrunt*). Like the Oldest Animals of *Culhwch*, Guigemar's

hermaphroditic hind/stag casts him into a new perception of the ways in which alternate times

overspill any subjective sense of the present. And by putting this weirded chronology in the

profoundly affective terms of love and suffering, the deer emphasizes the degree to which human

experience (specifically shared experience) warps time around its overwhelming intensities. The

violent verbs of this passage—*fiert/ferue* and *nafree*—are, after all, exactly those used in the

description of Guigemar's falling in love quoted above (lines 379-382).

As he attempts to come to terms with this prophecy, the young knight struggles with its

lack of referents.

> *Començat sei a purpenser*
> *En quel tere purrat aler*
> *Pur sa plaie faire guarir,*
> *Kar ne se volt laissier murir.*
> *Il set assez e bien le dit*
> *K'unke femme nule ne vit*
> *A ki il aturnast s'amur*
> *Ne kil guaresist de dolur.*[122]

(He began to wonder / to which land he might go / to have his wound healed, / for he did not wish to let himself die. / He knew indeed, and said it, / that he'd never seen a woman / to whom he might give his love, / nor who might heal his pain.)

In this close attention to Guigemar's thoughts, three unthinkable quantities circle one

another: a land he does not know; a woman he cannot imagine; and his own death. While this

last is in some sense the most straightforward result of his crisis (exsanguination requires no

supernatural reason to be fatal), it also constitutes the most radical departure from his experience.

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[122] Marie, *Guigemar*, 40 (lines 125-132).

Countenancing his mortality, Guigemar embarks towards an alterity that both contains and necessitates the otherworldly scene of his treatment and the parahuman woman who will administer it.

Like the white deer, the unpiloted ship is a supernatural entity that acts as a conveyance across spatiotemporal realities.[123] It does so specifically by ignoring local practicalities, as Marie points out rather bluntly when the dying Guigemar stumbles across the vessel: "*Li chivaliers fu mult pensis: / En la cuntree n'el païs / N'out unkes mes oï parler / Ke nefs i peüst ariver*"[124] ("The knight became very troubled; / in that country or land, / he had never heard it said / that ships could dock.") This could be read as an acknowledgment that the knight is leaving behind his own "*cuntree*" for one in which other possibilities operate. But it also emphasizes the degree to which this ship is not constrained by ordinary limitations. This is directly highlighted by its lack of a crew. Marie skillfully contrasts Guigemar's expectation with what he finds: *"Dedenz quida hummes truver, / Ki la nef deüssent garder: / N'i aveit nul ne nul ne vit*"[125] ("Inside, he thought to find men / who would be charged with guarding the ship; / there weren't any; he saw none.") The redundancy within line 169 emphasizes the young man's astonishment by confirming that his sensory perception accords with narratorial reality.

A full twenty-four lines (153-160 and 170-187) are then dedicated to describing the ship and its furniture. The bed receives a particularly lavish inventory—the pieces of its frame "*Furent a l'ovre Salemun / Taillié a or, tut a triffure, / De ciprés e de blanc ivure*"[126] ("were, with Solomon's art / fashioned from gold, all inset / with cypress and with white ivory.") "*L'ovre*

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[123] The unpiloted ship is a fairly common romance motif (see, e.g., Lewis, "Chaste Muslim Maiden," 174-177), though there are important differences between vessels that are conveyed through divine agency (and/or favorable winds) and those, like that in *Guigemar*, which seem to possess a strange mechanical agency of their own.

[124] Marie, *Guigemar*, 42 (lines 161-164).

[125] Marie, *Guigemar*, 42 (lines 167-169).

[126] Marie, *Guigemar*, 42 (lines 172-174).

Salemun," "Solomon's art," is a term used in medieval French texts to refer to decorative masterworks wrought in gold and ivory, perhaps according to specific techniques such as inlay and intaglio.[127] Yet given Solomon's associations with magic, and specifically the conjuring of spirits to carry out tasks invisibly,[128] the invocation of "Solomon's art" on a mysteriously self-piloting ship undoubtedly carries supernatural associations. The text neither confirms nor denies these. While the ship seems on the whole a positive force within the narrative, it acts more according to its own designs than its passengers' wishes, as Guigemar discovers after he awakes from a short rest on the bed: "*Puis est levez, aler s'en volt; / Il ne pout mie returner: / La nef est ja en halte mer!*"[129] ("Then he rose, he wished to go; / he cannot turn back at all; / the ship is already on the high seas!") While it could be interpreted as responding to the knight's inchoate desires, as a sort of intuitive automaton, the overriding impression is of an eerily obscure agency. And the vessel's uncanny emptiness—a feature of parahuman spaces that will resurface in both *Yonec* and *Guingamor*—initially terrifies Guigemar's lady when she and her servant see it beached by her prison tower: "*Ne veient rien ki la cunduie. / La dame volt turner en fuie: / Si ele ad pour n'est merveille!*"[130] ("They saw no one who steered it; / the lady wished to turn in flight. / If she is afraid, it's no wonder!")

Noteworthy in the details of its design are cypress and ivory, rare commodities that connoted value, distant lands, and, in the case of ivory, bizarre beasts that few Europeans of Marie's day had laid eyes on (elephants, hippopotamuses, walruses, narwhals, or mammoths preserved in permafrost). The description continues with the mention of more exotic materials:

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[127] Allegra Iafrate, *The Wandering Throne of Solomon: Objects and Tales of Kingship in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Leiden: Koninklikje Brill, 2015), 47-53. Given that *Guigemar* is very possibly the oldest text in which this term occurs, it may have been invented or popularized by Marie.
[128] For a dated but thorough summary of this tradition, see Lynn Thorndike, *Magic and Experimental Science, Volume II* (New York: Macmillan Co, 1923), 279-288.
[129] Marie, *Guigemar*, 44 (lines 190-192).
[130] Marie, *Guigemar*, 48 (lines 269-271).

seie a or teissu ("silk brocaded with gold"), *sabelin* ("sable"), and *purpre alexandrine* ("Alexandrian purple," a rare type of dyed cloth, named for the Egyptian port).[131] This diverse array does not suggest any common geographic origin; the bed instead combines and employs a world of wealth while implying the masterful craft of unseen and unknown hands. Aisling Byrne notes that otherworlds often have "a rather inorganic quality" conveyed by the lavish description of the artifice that they contain.[132] She terms this effect *pseudo-mimesis*—"a level of detail that we would associate with a mimesis of reality, but what they are ultimately conveying is a fantasy."[133] The automaton ship is not an otherworld but rather a conjugational construct that both connects disparate realms and makes them mutually "other" by offering its meticulously described yet ultimately inexplicable design as the only bridge between them.

Daniel Poirion points out that the description of the bed seems to borrow heavily from the account of Camille's tomb in the *Roman d'Enéas*; through this allusion, the voyage "prend l'aspect d'une navigation vers le pays des morts."[134] These resonances are heightened by the hero's deadly wound and meditation on his own mortality before embarking. And they are further reinforced when the lady's intrepid servant, investigating the mysterious boat, finds Guigemar in the bed: "*Pale le vit, mort le quida*"[135] ("She saw him pale, believed him dead.") The hero in turn adopts this imagery, via a romantic cliché, when he announces his feelings for the lady: "*Dame, fet il, jeo meorc pur vus*!"[136] ("'Lady,' he said, 'I die for you!'") These suggestions of death, which accumulate throughout the poem without quite cohering into a

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[131] Marie, 42-44 (lines 175, 181, and 182).
[132] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 26.
[133] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 31.
[134] Daniel Poirion, "La mort et la merveille chez Marie de France," in *Death in the Middle Ages*, ed. Herman Braet and Werner Verbeke (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1983), 191-204 (194-196).
[135] Marie, *Guigemar,* 48 (line 282).
[136] Marie, *Guigemar,* 60 (line 501).

straightforward metaphor (e.g., "Love equals death") nonetheless suggest a radical degree of transformation. By skirting the edges of mortality, Guigemar acquires the (hetero)sexuality that the text implies to be a missing part of his humanity. At the same time, however, the supernatural entities which conduct him along this journey suggest his engagement with a deeper strangeness.

Stephen G. Nichols suggests that the deer and ship represent an eruption of the "Celtic fantastic" that interrupts the ""rationality" of the socially normative" and in doing so, accomplishes a set of reversals "that transform the lay from lament to romance."[137] Without endorsing the ascription of either of these entities to the "Celtic," it is possible to see their "irrational" scrambling and reconfiguring of agency as a key mechanism by which both Guigemar and the lady are able to reconstitute one another's homelands as otherworlds of expansive narrative possibility.

Living in the Tellling

The process of transforming experience into story is repeatedly dramatized throughout the poem—five times, if we include the deer's rather vague premonitions. From lines 315-332, Guigemar rehearses his journey thus far to the lady; from 339-354, she likewise recapitulates to him what the narrator has related about her life. The story is diegetically told yet again on 605-609; this briefer summary perhaps due to the narrative circumstances, as Guigemar is explaining it to his lover's husband while simultaneously fending the man off with a curtain rod, since he and his lover have just been discovered *in flagrante delicto*, Here there is a meta-comment both comical and telling—after the jealous old man hears the tale, "*Il li respunt que pas nel creit*"[138] ("He replied to him that he did not believe it.") Finally, the lady tells the story of her adventure

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[137] Nichols, "Commonplaces," 146-147.
[138] Marie, *Guigemar*, 64 (line 611).

to an astounded Guigemar, once they are reunited (lines 825-835). This unusual interest in recapitulation highlights the degree to which both of the lovers actively conceive of themselves as participants in a story (as opposed to, say, victims of random accident). Marie may even imply that they imagine themselves in terms of text. She first points out that in there is a mural of Venus burning Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* ("*Le libre Ovide, ou il enseine / Comment chascuns s'amur estreine,*"[139] "The book of Ovid, in which he teaches / how one might rein in his love") on the walls of the lady's chamber. Later, after attraction sparks between the lovers, the tale describes the lady, "*Ki auks esteit reschaufee / Del feu dunt Guigemar se sent / Que sun queor alume e esprent*"[140] ("Who was likewise re-warmed / by the same fire that Guigemar feels / which lights up and engulfs his(/her) heart.") The formerly loveless pair, like Ovid's tome, are cast into Venus's flames. But this fire is more transformative than it is destructive. In their shared emotion, Guigemar and the lady become part of the same text. Joint participants in a tale that they enact through repeated recounting, each asserts an erotic engagement with a hitherto unimagined alterity.

But where, in all this, are the parahumans? At the poem's outset, Guigemar is introduced as an exemplary knight with an indelible flaw:

> *De tant i out mespris Nature*
> *Ke unc de nule amur n'out cure.*
> *Suz ciel n'out dame ne pucele*
> *Ki tant par fust noble ne bele,*
> *Se il dë amer la requeïst,*
> *Ke volentiers nel retentist.*
> *Plusurs le requistrent suvent,*
> *Mais il n'aveit de ceo talent.*
> *Nuls ne se pout aparceveir*
> *Ke il volsist amur aveir:*
> *Pur ceo le tienent a peri*

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[139] Marie, *Guigemar*, 46 (lines 239-240).
[140] Marie, *Guigemar,* 54 (lines 390-392).

E li estrange e si ami.[141]

(Yet Nature had so erred in him, / that he cared nothing at all for love. / Under the heavens there was no lady nor maiden, / no matter how noble or lovely, / that had he requested her love, / wouldn't have heeded him gladly. / Many made advances to him often, / but he had no desire for love. / None could perceive in him / that he wished to have love: / for that, all considered him doomed, / both strangers and friends.)

Burgess and Brook see in this description a "discreetly expressed" homosexuality;[142] Laurence Harf concurs, connecting this to a sort of arrested development: "Guigemar, comme Hippolyte, incarnerait le refus du passage a l'âge adulte et le refus de la virilité serait assimilé à l'homosexualité."[143] But as presented, Guigemar's queerness seems to partake more in asexuality than homosexuality. His lack of interest (*talent*) in romantic affairs positions him not only in isolation but in danger (*a peri*); peril, presumably, of dying without an heir and so being lost to history. This is the danger which the rebounding arrow makes urgently real. Yet as the constant diegetic retellings of Guigemar's story within *Guigemar* emphasize, it is also precisely this danger which spurs and shapes the narrative. In Guigemar's initial refusal of attraction, "strangers and friends" sense a vulnerability to time that will manifest as affinity for another, older world; a latent bond that will not only validate but in fact require his celibacy at the beginning.

His lady—who remains, like many of Marie's characters, nameless throughout the poem—is introduced simply as "*Une dame de haut parage, / Franche, curteise, bele e sage*"[144] ("A lady of high birth, / noble, courtly, fair and wise.") Sharing this exemplarity with her future lover, she is likewise separated from her society, albeit more physically than affectively. Her old

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[141] Marie, *Guigemar,* 36-38 (lines 57-68).
[142] Burgess and Brook, *Lays*, 154.
[143] Harf, "La Reine," 92.
[144] Marie, *Guigemar,* 44 (lines 211-212).

husband, terrified of being cuckolded, has built an enclosure for her and left her with a eunuch

priest, whose complete lack of sexual traits ("*Les plus bas membres out perduz,*"[145] "He had lost

his lowest member") both recalls and inverts the ambivalent gender of Guigemar's hind/stag.

Just as the latter creature provides the knight with a sense (albeit a vague one) of his future, so

the lady has access to a similar premonition, telling her knight: "*Mis quors me dit que jeo vus*

perc: / Seü serum e descovert"[146] ("My heart tells me that I will lose you; / We will be known

and discovered.")

Her prophecy precedes her tying of the intractable knot in Guigemar's shirt, which he

matches with an equally steadfast belt. These bonds seem suspiciously like magical taboos;

though one could just about imagine a knot-puzzle that required a certain technique to undo, it is

difficult to picture something similarly complex for a belt buckle. The mechanisms the lovers

employ to guarantee their mutual chastity are reciprocally magical, as emphasized by the boorish

Merïadus's forceful but failed attempt to undo the lady's belt. This magic springs neither from an

inherent otherworldliness nor from arcane study, but from a jointly constituted alterity into which

each initiates the other. As the lady's clever servant girl tells Guigemar, "*Vus estes bels e ele est*

bele"[147] ("You are beautiful and she is beautiful"). This simple adjective, shared by virtually all

parahumans in the poems discussed in this chapter, becomes here an invocation of likeness that

is both a distinction from background normality and a validation of their joint participation in the

destinee predicted by the white deer.

This paralleling of the lady's situation and Guigemar's suggests that each is more

connected to the other than they are to their own surroundings; that each is pulled towards some

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[145] Marie, *Guigemar,* 46 (line 257).
[146] Marie, *Guigemar,* 62 (lines 547-548).
[147] Marie, *Guigemar,* 56 (line 453).

other place in which their otherness can become, if anything, even more accentuated. Guigemar arrives in the lady's country in the semblance of a corpse. And when the unpiloted ship takes her in turn to Brittany, men searching the vessel "*Dedenz unt la dame trovee / ki de beuté resemble fee*"[148] ("Inside found the lady, / who in her beauty resembles a fairy.") This metaphor offers the only appearance of the word *fee* in Marie's *contes bretonnes*. It points coyly to the lady's otherworldly homeland and parahuman associations without substantivizing them. Furthermore, since the poem has already identified *beuté* as the trait which Guigemar and the lady share, and through which they are linked, this quality of *feerie* bleeds through their shared text to inflect him as well.

Critics have seen in *Guigemar* the suppression of an originally more supernatural tale. "By replacing the fairy mistress with a mortal woman," Frederick Hodgson writes, "and retaining the fairy elements useful in a portrait of the fated love of alienated characters, Marie has maintained in her story the multiplicity of realities and simultaneously produced a purely human conflict."[149] Sara Sturm imagines Marie as having "reduced the supernatural aspects in order perhaps to emphasize the 'roman d'amour.'"[150] Endorsing this presumed fantastic precursor, Francis Dubost writes of the lady that "elle n'est peut-être plus une fée, mais elle est beaucoup plus qu'une simple femme, puisque'elle bénéficie de tous les appuis de la féerie."[151] But there is neither the evidence nor the need to posit such an evolutionary scheme behind Marie's tale. Furthermore, the story's careful balancing of the lovers' strangeness would seem to require that any increase in her otherness be matched by a surfeit of his.

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[148] Marie, *Guigemar*, 70 (lines 703-704).
[149] Frederick Hodgson, "Alienation and the Otherworld in *Lanval*, *Yonec*, and *Guigemar*," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 5, no. 1 (1974): 19–31 (27).
[150] Sara Sturm, *The Lay of Guingamor: A Study* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 18.
[151] Dubost, "Motifs," 78.

There is, however, one moment in which the lady manifests a magic for which her lover demonstrates no obvious equivalent. After Guigemar's departure, she spends two years imprisoned in her marble tower. Then, wishing to drown herself in the spot where Guigemar departed, she simply desires to be free. "*Tute esbaïe vient à l'hus, / Ne treve clefe ne sereüre, / Fors s'en eissi; par aventure / Unques nuls ne la desturba*"[152] ("Completely overcome, she went to the entrance, / found neither key nor lock. / She went out; as it chanced, / no one accosted her at all.") Her love-inspired anguish does not create new realities but rather undoes them; the locks and guards put in place to contain her simply melt away. While she initially seeks to kill herself, the magical ship no more allows her to do this than it had allowed Guigemar to turn back from his voyage. The vessel appears, instead, exactly "*U ele se voleit neier*"[153] ("where she had wished to drown"), a substitute for death that brings her into, rather than out of, the flow of legible historical time.

Aisling Byrne writes that the plot of *Guigemar*:

> …is predicated upon problems of access, understanding, and interpretation. Guigemar's untouchable heart provides an emotional analogue to the heroine's physical imprisonment by her husband. The supernatural journey between these gendered worlds, the encounter with the 'other', is the means by which the hero and heroine are liberated from these restraints.[154]

This liberation is at the same time a reintegration. The lovers' otherness becomes mediated by a normative relationship in a named and recognizable land, and so seems to lose its function.[155] With their union, *Guigemar* seems to provide a less complicated "happy ending" than any of the

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[152] Marie, *Guigemar,* 68 (lines 674-677).
[153] Marie, *Guigemar*, 68 (line 680).
[154] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 56.
[155] Harf, "La Reine," 102.

other works discussed in this chapter. It is perhaps all the more surprising, given the intensity of the deer's prophetic speech; do a few years' separation and the ineffectual interventions of two lecherous men really constitute "*Issi grant peine e tel dolur / K'unkes femme taunt ne suffri*"? Only, perhaps, metatextually; insofar as *Guigemar* presents a dream of successful integration across worlds that subsequent tales of parahuman romance, in Harley 978 and in the anonymous works patterned on Marie's poems, will insist is nearly impossible.

2. Seeding the Alien in *Yonec*

A young woman is imprisoned in a tower by her aged husband. Long captivity saps her spirit and her beauty. Dreaming of freedom through true love, she conjures a goshawk which flies through her window and metamorphoses into a dashing young man. After assuring her that he has long loved her from afar and is, despite his shapeshifting, not a demon, they begin an affair. Love restores her beauty, and her husband, made suspicious by her renewed vitality, discovers her infidelity. He sets a spiked trap at the window and, on his next visit, the hawk-knight is impaled and mortally wounded. Dying, he confides that the woman has become pregnant by him, and prophecies that their child will grow to avenge them. When he flies off, the woman follows him, tracking his bloody trail through an earth mound into an eerie city. She finds her lover on the brink of death, and he gives her both a ring that will make her husband forget the entire affair and a sword with which their son will achieve revenge. The woman escapes the city and returns home. For years she acts the dutiful wife, raising a child who believes he is, and is believed to be, her husband's son. After the boy is dubbed a knight, the family takes a journey to a neighboring town. Along the way, they come upon an abbey where

the hawk-knight's tomb lies. There, the woman reveals the truth of her son's parentage and dies; whereupon the boy immediately takes bloody revenge on the man he had thought was his father, and inherits his true father's kingdom.

Of all the Breton tales written by Marie de France, *Yonec* engages the most deeply with the parahuman and the stakes of its encounter with our world. Throughout, it evinces a profound interest in the idea of borders and the hybrid identities produced and metamorphosed across them. Alongside its uncanny female protagonist, it features not only a summonable shapeshifter but an extended view of his uncanny kingdom; it concludes not merely with an intermingling between the strange and the quotidian but with an eruptively violent assertion of otherworldly affiliation. And it insists on the radical potential of narrative for generating and destroying bodies, worlds, and the histories they contain.

The Time and Shape of Difference

At the poem's beginning, Marie highlights her tale's interest in filiation: she will tell of Yonec, "*Dunt il fu nez, e de sun pere / Cum il vint primes a sa mere. / Cil ki engendra Ywenec / Aveit a nun Muldumarec*"[156] ("How he was born, and about his father, / how he first came to his mother. / He who sired Yonec / had the name Muldumarec.") This seemingly straightforward genealogical account will be greatly complicated by the facts of the narrative: that the mother is married to another man, that Muldumarec is no ordinary human, that Yonec will be born after his father's death and grow up in ignorance of him. While the pair of exotic names here may prime an audience for Celtic-themed romance, this prelude in fact marks the only appearance of Muldumarec's name in the poem. It supplies the difficult rhyme for his son's name, then

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[156] Marie, *Yonec*, 192 (lines 7-10).

vanishes, not so much forgotten as irrelevant. The father's otherworldly origin will prove far

more important than his name, which, after all, links him to no legible history in this world—

while it resembles Brittonic, and specifically Breton, phonology, "Muldumarec" does not seem

to be recorded as a personal name anywhere outside this poem.

After this brief prologue, Marie opens the narrative itself by outlining its setting: like

Guigemar, it is sited in the Brittonic West and temporally in the past.

> *En Bretaingne maneit jadis*
> *Un riches hum, viel e antis*;
> *De Caruënt fu avouez*
> *E del país sire clamez.*
> *La cité siet sur Duëlas;*
> *Jadis i ot de nes trespas.*[157]

> (In Britain lived long ago / a powerful man, old and ancient; he was *advocatus* of Caerwent, and called lord of the land. / The city stood upon the Duëlas; / long ago, ships could pass there.)

Though the exact geography is somewhat vexed,[158] most commentators agree that

Bretaingne in this case refers to Great Britain, and that the area in question is in South Wales

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[157] Marie, *Yonec,* 192 (lines 11-16).
[158] The village of Caerwent seems a good fit for Marie's *Caruënt*; in addition to the closely matching name, Caerwent had an early medieval monastery (thus explaining the *advocatus*) and is a reasonable ten miles' distance from Caerleon. This is in turn a strong match for the poem's *Karlïon*, towards which the *advocatus*, his wife, and Yonec travel at the end of the story for the feast of St. Aaron—a third-century martyr generally thought to have met his end in Caerleon. The difficulties, however, arise with the Duëlas. Caerwent does not have a river of that name; in fact, it has no rivers at all, only a handful of tiny brooks that are both too small to navigate and lack connection to larger water systems. While a few Welsh rivers bear the name *Afon Dulas* ("Black-green River") or *Dulais* ("Black Stream,") these are nowhere near Caerwent or Caerleon. The usual solution (as outlined in Burgess, *The Lays*, 21) is to assume that one of the little watercourses around Caerwent once bore one of these names, and that Marie is fancifully imagining that it was once much larger. Critics are generally less inclined to imagine that Marie had little or no local knowledge of the areas in question, though given that we know nothing about her, this must also be a possibility. But there are other options. *Caerwent* means simply "Fort of Gwent," the Welsh kingdom lying between the Seven, Wye, and Usk, and so could perhaps refer to some other stronghold within those boundaries. Chepstow (Welsh *Cas-Gwent* or *Castell-Gwent*, "Castle of Gwent") is only five miles from Caerwent. The eponymous fortress, among the oldest surviving stone castles in Britain, perches dramatically above the River Wye (*Afon Gwy*), and a visitor in either Marie's day or the present could be forgiven for borrowing it as the setting for a legendary romance. While the Wye is a poor etymological fit for *Duëlas*, it is today navigable for small craft and could well be imagined once hosting larger vessels.

near the border with England. In the second half of the twelfth century, this was very much an active warzone between local Welsh princes and Norman Marcher lords, occasionally supported by the Angevin crown—an amateur history of Caerleon suggests that the town changed hands back and forth at least seven times between 1160 and 1175.[159] Yet Marie does not set her story amid the violence of her present but rather in a vague and distant past. The bloodshed in *Yonec* is all rooted in sexual jealousy, rather than conquest or protonationalist enmity. Historically, the *advocatus* (an official fulfilling secular lordly duties for a monastic estate) represents a French/Norman administrative innovation, perhaps suggesting a post-1066 timeframe. But the repetition of the word *jadis* ("bygone times") within six lines, together with the description of the *advocatus* as "*antis*," "ancient" (the same word that described the woman's city in *Guigemar*) emphasizes chronological distance more than continuity.

This past, furthermore, is marked by a greater degree of access, introduced by the image of ships connecting places that they no longer do. At least for those encountering the *lais* in the Harley 978 order, this notice about ships both contrasts that in *Guigemar* (where the Breton coast was considered inaccessible to naval traffic) and, in conjunction with the prologue's promise to tell of how Muldumarec *came* to Yonec's mother, perhaps primes the audience to expect a supernatural conveyance akin to that poem's unpiloted ship. This link to *Guigemar* is again emphasized in the unnamed woman's situation, which closely mirrors that of Guigemar's lover: a childless beauty kept locked in a tower by her old and jealous husband, with only a decrepit and desexualized elder standing guard. The parallels between Guigemar's lady and the central female character of *Yonec* both recall the ways in which Guigemar himself operates as an

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[159] Anthony Jermyn, *A Canter Through Caerleon*, 2010, http://www.acanterthroughcaerleon.org.uk/.

otherworldly figure with regards to the realm he visits; and suggests that the parahuman affiliations of Yonec's mother extend beyond her choice of partner.

Before the admittedly memorable transformation of hawk into man, it is this woman who undergoes the poem's first metamorphosis. Imprisoned in her lord's tower, "*Sa beuté pert en teu mesure / Cume cele ki n'en ad cure / De sei meïsme mieuz vousist / Que mort hastive la preisist.*"[160] ("she lost her beauty in this way, / as one who cares no longer for it. / For herself, she wanted most / for death to take her quickly away.") This transformation out of beauty and towards death suggests a premature aging, an acceleration of her empty and unfulfilled temporality. When her lover appears, this progression will slow, postponed but never quite abandoned. While hardly *hastive*, her ensuing adventure does indeed compel her repeatedly towards mortality; first the death of her lover, her journey to his hidden realm and stated desire to die at his side, and finally her own demise immediately before the slaughter of her husband. The nameless central character of *Yonec* is a woman out of joint with time, a disjuncture that she embraces with dramatically supernatural results.

It is her awareness of the gap between external chronologies and her own felt time that compels her to incite the narrative action. April comes, the birds are singing, her husband has gone hunting; only she is barred from spring possibility. This inspires her to meditate on another, deeper temporal break:

> *Mut ai sovent oï cunter*
> *Que l'em suleit jadis trover*
> *Aventures en cest païs*
> *Ki rehaitouent les pensis.*
> *Chevalier trovoent puceles*
> *A lur talent, gentes e beles,*
> *E dames truvoent amanz*
> *Beaus e curteis, pruz e vaillanz,*

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[160] Marie, *Yonec,* 194 (lines 47-50).

Si que blasmees n'en esteient
Ne nul fors eles nes veeient.
Si ceo peot estrë e ceo fu,
Si unc a nul est avenue,
Deu, ki de tut ad poësté,
Il en face ma volenté![161]

(I've so often heard it told / that long ago, people used to encounter / adventures in this land, / which freed them from their cares. / Knights found maidens / as they wished, noble and fair, / and ladies found lovers, / fair and courtly, brave and strong, / and were never condemned for it, / for none but the ladies saw them. / If that could be, and it was, / if it ever happened to anyone, / God, who has power over all things, / may he accomplish it as my will!)

Stuck in a barren season as the rest of the world awakes, the woman realizes that she is likewise trapped in an age devoid of *aventures*. These ideal romances, she has heard, took place long ago (*jadis*), an adverb that, in conjunction with its double appearance at the poem's beginning, creates here a sort of *plus-que-parfait*. The woman's description of these relationships may even point towards parahuman affairs, depending on whether the lovers can only be seen by their ladies due to their discretion and guile (think Tristan) or thanks to a glamour of invisibility. As she speaks, the woman builds to a revelation that is also an incantatory spell, built upon a weaving of tenses: a compound conditional (*peot estrë*, "could be"), then a simple past (*fu*, "was"), a compound past (*est avenue*, "happened"), and finally a ringing subjunctive—*face*, "may [he] do, may [he] accomplish." She thus transmutes her untimeliness from prison to power.

Francis Dubost notes the bizarreness of the woman's prayer, which asks God to do *her* will (reversing the last words of the Sermon on the Mount). Yet her boldness in making this demand is rooted in a truth that, she realizes, is no less real for being past. She sees it, Dubost writes, as something of a cultural heritage:

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[161] Marie, *Yonec,* 196 (lines 91-104).

> [L]es histoires que la dame se remémore prennent des formes culturelles très précises: d'une part, les formes courtoises et féeriques de la relation amoureuse avec, en particulier, l'exigence du secret; d'autre part, l'enracinement dans une province imaginaire "*cest païs*" (v. 93)—c'est-à-dire l'espace breton—propice au surgissement des "*aventures*".[162]

Here, perhaps, the fact that her spell is spurred by the land's awakening is significant, much as the *oisel* she hears singing seem to prefigure the form her summoning takes. According to Sharon Kinoshita, Marie is here drawing a link with her own creative activity; like her author, "the lady has been listening to indigenous tales of *aventure*; instead of *translating* them, however, she seeks to *relive* them—her amorous aspirations linked to Marie's literary ones by the repetition of the verb *trover*." But where Kinoshita reads a "desire for escape," [163] the text suggests something more radical—a translation of her entire world into a reborn past. The woman's power exceeds the merely verbal in its conjuring of alternate realities, and it is no wonder that Katharine G. MacCornack refers to her as an enchanter.[164]

But in the exhilaration of her speech, it is easy to forget that her wish seems to be only partially granted. The *aventure* into which she is thrust only briefly frees her from her cares, before plunging her into even more dreadful ones. In the end, she is *not* the only one who can see her lover; once spotted, he is doomed to die, and she is condemned to spend the rest of her days nurturing revenge for him. Without supposing Marie's deep familiarity with Welsh lore, it may be worth pointing out that many of the most famous medieval Brittonic love stories (those of Esyllt, Gwynhwyfar, Branwen, Creiddylad…) are tragedies; in magicking herself into one, the

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[162] Dubost, "Yonec," 450-452.
[163] Kinoshita, *Boundaries*, 113.
[164] Katharine G. MacCornack, "Adultère, Mère, Vengeresse: L'Héroine Mortelle Face à l'Influence du Merveilleux dans *Yonec* de Marie de France," in *Die Welt der Feen im Mittelalter : II. Tagung auf dem Mont Saint-Michel / Le Monde des fées dans la culture médiévale : IIème congrès au Mont Saint-Michel*, ed. Danielle Buschinger and Wolfgang Spiewok (Greifswald : Reineke-Verlag, 1994), 102.

woman is perhaps committing the error of a modern reader who romanticizes *Romeo and Juliet* for the balcony scene, and forgets the sticky ending. But coming as it does on the tail of her stated desire for death, her invocation of British legends may embrace them as much for their epic *Todestrieb* as for their promise of sexual fulfilment.

Her words take immediate effect.

> *Quant ele ot fait sa pleinte issi,*
> *L'umbre d'un grant oisel choisi*
> *Par mi une estreite fenestre;*
> *Ele ne seit que ceo pout estre.*
> *En la chambre volant entra;*
> *Gez ot as pies, ostur sembla,*
> *De cinc mues fu u de sis.*
> *Il s'est devant la dame asis.*
> *Quant il i ot un poi esté*
> *E ele l'ot bien esgardé,*
> *Chevalier bel e gent devint.*
> *La dame a merveille le tint;*
> *Li sens li remut e fremi,*
> *Grant poür ot, sun chief covri.*[165]

(When she had thus made her lament, / she picked out the shadow of a great bird / through a narrow window; / she didn't know what it could be. / It came flying into her room; / it had jesses on its feet; it seemed a goshawk, / five molts old, or six. / It seated itself before the lady. / When it had been there a short while, / and she had studied it well, / it became a fair and noble knight; / the lady considered it a marvel; / her pulse quickened and she trembled, / and terrified, covered her head.)

By characterizing the woman's prior speech as a *pleinte*, a lament, the narrator seems to endorse a notion of inherent and even retrospective tragedy; she mourns not only her current suffering but also, perhaps, the even more dramatic hardships that have not yet befallen her. Yet the marvel her words manifest is first bewildering, as the hawk (no wild raptor, it seems, but a tamed hunting bird) takes shape; then petrifying, as it shifts suddenly into the form of her desire.

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[165] Marie, *Yonec*, 198 (lines 105-118).

Jeanne-Marie Boivin points out that this transformation is typical of medieval writers describing metamorphosis, who, unlike Ovid, do not dwell on the moment of transformation.[166] The sense is instead of an instantaneous becoming, a blink from one state to another. Later, as the woman's chaperone spies on her charge's liaisons, she is left with the same impression: "*Cele le vit, si l'esgarda, / Coment il vint e il ala. / De ceo ot ele grant poür / Que hume le vit e pus ostur*"[167] ("She saw him, and watched him, / how he came and he went. / This terrified her greatly, / that she saw him a man and then a goshawk.") For both women, it is not either form that inspires fear, but the uncanny sense of an identity persisting across two incommensurate shapes. Becoming (*devenir*) is supposed to unfold in time, as a gradual reconfiguring that can bridge even seemingly disparate entities by tracking processes (history, narrative, ontogeny, evolution). But the parahuman betrays this expectation; it skips ahead (or backward), and this break more than any concrete aspect of the resulting state constitutes its alterity.

The woman experiences this leap as a *merveille*, a reconfiguration of ordinary possibility; though, as Dubost writes, the marvel is also "le succès du "charme", la réussite d'une incantation, la concrétisation d'une parole évoquant un autrefois de l'amour…"[168] This summoning, in the context of a woman's poetic creation, is moreover explicitly feminine, since it is a direct response to patriarchal oppression: the masculine hegemonies to which she is subject "ne peuvent que susciter des contre-pouvoirs imaginaires."[169] That these powers are coded as

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[166] Jeanne-Marie Boivin, "Bisclavret et Muldumarec: La Part de l'Ombre dans les Lais," in *Amour et Merveilles: Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Jean Dufournet, (Paris: Honoré Champion Editeur, 1995), 147-168 (155).
[167] Marie, *Yonec*, 206 (lines 275-278).
[168] Dubost, "Yonec," 452.
[169] Dubost, "Yonec," 454. Richard Firth Green identifies a similar current in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, detecting how "[b]eneath [the *Tale's*] androcentric quest for what women really want, then, lies a much older ideological level where masculine violation of natural harmony is subject to the discipline and correction of a magical universe…" (Green, *Elf Queens*, 50).

past challenges modern assumptions that associate bygone times with the weight of conservative tradition. The ancient here is liberatory, literally winged.

When Muldumarec speaks, he both confirms and complicates the premises upon which the woman has called him forth.

> *Dame, fet il, n'eiez pour:*
> *Gentil oisel ad en ostur.*
> *Si li segrei vus sunt oscur,*
> *Gardez ke seiez a seür,*
> *Si fetes de mei vostre ami!*
> *Pur ceo, fet il, vinc jeo ici.*
> *Jeo vus ai lungement amee*
> *E en mun quor mut desiree;*
> *Unkes femme fors vus n'amai*
> *Ne jamés autre ne amerai.*
> *Mes ne poeie a vus venir*
> *Ne fors de mun paleis eissir,*
> *Si vus ne me eüssez requis.*
> *Or puis bien estre vostre amis.*[170]

('Lady,' he said, 'don't be afraid: / the goshawk is a noble bird. / Though these mysteries are obscure to you, / you can rest assured, / and make me your lover! / For this,' he said, 'I came here. / I have loved you long / and deeply desired you in my heart; / never have I loved another woman, / nor ever will I love another. / But I wouldn't have been able to come to you, / nor even leave my palace,[171] / had you not called for me. / Now I can truly be your lover.')

By affirming the nobility of the goshawk, Muldumarec seems to clarify that this form is not a mere disguise; it is fully part of his nature. Exactly how this is meant to set the woman at ease is unclear—perhaps he is indicating their fundamental affinity, the suitability of their match, whatever obscure *segrei*, "secrets, mysteries," lie (and will continue to lie) between them. His

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[170] Marie, *Yonec*, 198 (lines 121-134).
[171] In other texts (e.g., Laurence Harf-Lancner's edition of Karl Wernke's text, *Lais de Marie de France* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1990), 188), this word is given as *païs*, "land," which may make better sense; if Muldumarec is indeed the king of his country, it is hard to imagine that he wouldn't be able to move about freely, at least within its borders. Yet the jesses on his feet do perhaps suggest that he is not completely at liberty; who or what might have been keeping him captive, though, is never revealed.

speech as a whole hinges on this idea of reciprocity. Like her, he pined for an unseen love object from which he was barred; now her words have released them both. His declarations of devotion align almost suspiciously with the terms of her imagined ancient stories, though here again is a foreshadowing of tragedy: he will indeed love no other because once their affair begins, he will not have much longer to live. Andrzej Dziedzic comments on the connection between these two elements of his speech:

> Comme la mal-mariée, Muldumarec a aussi été victime de frustration pendant de longues années en attendant l'appel de la dame… Prisonnier de son peuple de l'Au-delà, il ne peut demeurer autant qu'il le voudrait auprès de son amie et n'étant plus invisible aux mortels, il permettra au monde des vulgaires d'avoir prise sur lui et de le blesser à mort.[172]

The woman now displays a degree of genre-savviness: she recognizes that the language both of her appeal and the hawk-knight's response recalls common folkloric and magical methods for summoning evil spirits. She has assumed infernal origins already with regard to her husband, if perhaps only rhetorically ("*Quant il dut ester baptiziez, / Si fu el flum d'enfern plungiez,*"[173] "When he should have been baptized, / he must have instead been plunged into the river of hell!"); faced with this new apparition, she remains on her guard. As Barbara Fass Leavy notes, "…demon lovers throughout the world seem to have an uncanny ability to single out those women in rebellion against patriarchal restrictions."[174] Aware of the transgressive path she is taking, the woman seeks a very specific reassurance, promising to accept his love "*S'en Deu*

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[172] Dziedzic, "Espace Surnaturel," 399-400.
[173] Marie, *Yonec*, 196 (lines 87-88).
[174] Leavy, *Swan Maiden*, 12. Indeed, virtually an identical scene to this occurs in an unusual thirteenth century account of Merlin's birth—the wizard's incubus father enters his mother's chamber as a bird before turning into a human (discussed in Green, *Elf Queens*, 90-91).

creïst e issi fust / Que lur amur estre peüst, / Kar mut esteit de grant beauté"[175] ("if he believed in God, and if it were / that their love could be, / for he was truly very beautiful.") What occurs here is a sort of negotiation over the degree of his parahumanity. Muldumarec's shapechanging and unknown origins can be disregarded, she implies, so long as he is Christian and so long as their love is possible. Since their affair remains adulterous, and barred by obstacles that only his powers of flight can overcome, she presumably means possible in the physical sense; is he substantial enough, she asks, that they can have sex?

In response to the first concern, her lover goes to great pains to assert his Christian credentials: "*Jeo crei mut bien el Creatur, / Ki nus geta de la tristur / U Adam nus mist, nostre pere, / Par le mors de la pumme amere*"[176] ("I believe very much in the Creator, / who cast us out from the despair / in which Adam placed us, our father, / by biting that bitter apple.") Specifying his descent from Adam and his possession of original sin, Muldumarec asserts both that his human shape is as fundamental as his hawk form, and that his adulterous sexual transgression is theoretically every bit as serious as hers. As unassailable proof of his mortal nature, he arranges an elaborate scheme—the woman will feign fatal illness, a priest will come, and then, her lover says, "*La semblance de vus prendrai*"[177] ("I will take on your appearance") and receive communion.

Practically, this ruse ensures that the woman can maintain the semblance of solitude. The implication, however, is that Muldumarec is not restricted to the two shapes he first demonstrates. Rather, he can take on seemingly any form, up to and including his lover's own. The proof of his Christian reliability is simultaneously a demonstration of his complete

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[175] Marie, *Yonec*, 198 (lines 139-141).
[176] Marie, *Yonec*, 200 (lines 149-152).
[177] Marie, *Yonec*, 200 (line 161).

indifference to corporeal constancy. Capable of being anyone, any animal, he occupies an entirely different register of being, divorced from species, gender, age, and so time. By assuming her form specifically, he both demonstrates their otherworldly affinity and suggests a radically expanded concept of identity. Though Muldumarec issues forth from her desires, their relationship is not so much incestuous or autoerotic as it is generative of a queerly multiple selfhood.

Participating in this new parahumanity, the woman reverses her earlier transformation. "*Sun cors teneit en grant chierté: / Tute recovre sa beauté*"[178] ("She looked after her body with great care, / completely recovered her beauty.") Her appearance even seems to exceed recovery, to become something novel: "*Esteit tut sis semblanz changez*"[179] ("her entire appearance had changed.") And when Muldumarec is fatally injured, she finds that she can follow him out from her prison: "*Par une fenestre s'en ist; / C'est merveille k'el ne s'ocist, / Kar bien aveit vint piez de haut*"[180] ("She went out through a window; / it's a marvel that she didn't kill herself, / for it was easily twenty feet up.") This "marvel" parallels the tale's first, the hawk-knight's arrival; in both cases, the seemingly impregnable tower proves permeable. It also closely recalls the lady's escape from her suddenly unlocked prison in *Guigemar*. As in that poem, the newly free woman only accesses the quotidian outside space she has been so long denied as a means of passage to an altogether different world.

Portal Fantasy

Following the trail of her lover's blood, the woman comes upon a *hoge*, a mound:

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[178] Marie, *Yonec,* 202 (lines 215-216).
[179] Marie, *Yonec,* 204 (line 227).
[180] Marie, *Yonec*, 208-210 (lines 337-339).

En cele hoge ot une entrée,
De cel sanc fu tute arusee;
Ne pot nïent avant veer.
Dunc quidot ele bien saver
Que sis amis entré i seit:
Dedenz se met a grant espleit.
El n'i trovat nule clarté.
Tant ad le dreit chemin erré
Que fors de la hoge est issue
E en un mut bel pré venue.[181]

(In this mound there was an entrance, / completely drenched with that blood; / she could see nothing further in. / So she thought to find out / if her lover had entered there: / she plunged bravely inside; / she found no light there. / She followed the straight path so long / that she emerged from the mound / and came into a very lovely meadow.)

Hoge is a borrowing into Norman French from Old Norse *haugr* ("high place, hill"), likewise the origin of the archaic English *how(e).* Together with its Scandinavian cognates, this term is often connected to the prehistoric burial mounds which dot the North Atlantic landscape. These in turn are widely linked to parahumans, perhaps most famously in the case of the Irish *aes sídhe* ("people of the mounds"). As with many other motifs in Marie's poetry, however, there is no need here to invoke far-flung Celtic analogues. *Hoges* were and remain prominent topographical features of the lands she wrote about, and their uncanny narrative significance could easily cohere locally through their associations with the buried treasure, knowledge, and bodies of past ages.

The text is purposefully ambiguous on the exact spatial configuration of the mound and meadow (*pré*). A straightforward reading suggests that the field simply lies on the other side of the tumulus; the woman enters the mound, walks straight ahead, and emerges on the other side. But if this is the case, why plunge into the darkness of the ancient tomb rather than simply going around it? Even the largest Northern European howes are under a hundred meters in diameter.

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[181] Marie, *Yonec*, 210 (lines 347-356).

And in returning, she will again pass through the mound: "*Vers la hoge sa veie tint; / Dedenz entra, utre est passee, / Si s'en reveit en sa cuntree*"[182] ("she kept on towards the mound; / entered inside, and passed beyond it, / and so returned to her own country.") This implies both that this is the only route of access to Muldumarec's kingdom, and that his realm constitutes a separate *cuntree*, albeit one that lacks the topographical details (and contingent histories) that Marie provides for her heroine's land. There is a strong sense that this land cannot be reconciled to maps and onomastics or indeed to any normative conception of space. The meadow does not seem to lie within the *hoge*, or below it. The prehistoric monument rather acts as a sort of portal, opening into a zone both bordering and discontinuous with the Welsh marches.

The spoor leads her now to a city (*cité*):

> *De mur fu close tut entur;*
> *N'i ot mesun, sale ne tur*
> *Ki ne parust tute d'argent;*
> *Mut sunt riche li mandement.*
> *Devers le burc sunt li mareis*
> *E les forez e les difeis.*
> *De l'autre part, vers le dunjun,*
> *Curt une ewe tut envirun;*
> *Iloec arivoent les nefs,*
> *Plus i aveit de treis cent tres.*
> *La porte aval fu desfermee;*
> *La dame est en la vile entree.*[183]

> (It was enclosed all around by a wall; There was no house, chamber or tower / that doesn't seem all made of silver / The amenities are truly splendid. / Around the town are the marshes, / and the forests and the reserves. / On the other side, by the keep, / a watercourse circles all around; / there ships would arrive; / there were more than three hundred and three. / The lower gate was unlocked; / the lady entered the city.)

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[182] Marie, *Yonec*, 214 (lines 452-454).
[183] Marie, *Yonec*, 210 (lines 361-372).

With its well-trafficked river and formidable defenses that the lady nonetheless surpasses with ease, this city seems to be a mirror image of Caerwent. Sharon Kinoshita observes that it "occupies nearly the same space as the prosaic world, as if in anamorphic alternation with it."[184] Like her lover's adoption of her form, the city's reflection of the woman's world implies a multiplication of her being, a shadowy double. But its luxuriant riches also link it to the opulence of otherworld economies, further suggested by the sheer number of vessels in its port. These in turn imply that the hidden realm accessed through the *hoge* is not a local phenomenon, but rather an extensive, unknown geography—truly an other world. Inside, however, there is no trace of inhabitants: "*Unkes nul a li ne parla, / Humme ne femme n'i trova*"[185] ("No one spoke to her. / She found neither man nor woman there.") Other than a pair of knights sleeping in chambers adjacent to the room where her lover lies dying,[186] she will encounter no one else in the city. It is certainly inhabited—Muldumarec warns her not to stay, since:

> *Ci einz avrat si grant dolur,*
> *Si vus i esteiez trovee,*
> *Mut en serïez turmentee.*
> *Bien iert entre ma gent seü*
> *Que me unt por vostre amur perdu.*[187]
>
> (There will soon be such an outpouring of grief, / that if you were found here, / you would be tortured terribly. / It will be well known amongst my people / that they have lost me through your love.)

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[184] Kinoshita, *Boundaries*, 120.
[185] Marie, *Yonec*, 210 (lines 375-376).
[186] It is hard to know what to make of these sleeping knights, who are not otherwise referenced. For Frederick Hodgson, they represent additional, latent narratives, "other knights seemingly available to fulfill the needs of reality-rejecting damsels" (Hodgson, "Alienation," 25). But Muldumarec's status seems unique—he is the king, and the subject of the city's overwhelming grief. If they are merely his retainers, on the other hand, they are being remarkably derelict in keeping their death-watch.
[187] Marie, *Yonec,* 212 (lines 404-408).

The only sign of these people comes as she leaves the city—she hears bells ring, "*E le doel el chastel mener / Por lur seignur ki se mureit*"[188] ("and the mourning procession wending through the fortress / for their lord who had died.")

What does it mean that Muldumarec's home lies in this place of silence and absence, a realm where his subjects have left him to bleed out unattended yet allegedly so love him that they will attack his lover for having (very indirectly) caused his death? While not exactly subterranean, the land's chthonic associations—its katabatic entrance, metallic riches, empty streets, the looming threat of its unseen inhabitants—suggest an underworld, a place where death is both omnipresent and unforgivable. In conjunction with its king's predilection for prophecy, it may be understood as a place where everything already has (or already will have) happened; a past that is also a inevitable future destination, a time-bound prison that resents the freedom of present.[189] Its eerie vacancy, like that of the sylvan castle Guingamor encounters, is that of an abandoned site, where it is not wise to linger.

All the more striking, then, that when the family finally comes upon Yonec's father's tomb, it lies somewhere along the ten-mile road between Caerwent and Caerleon, in "*un chastel; / En tut le mund nen ot plus bel. / Une abbeïe i ot dedenz / De mut religïuses genz*"[190] ("a castle; / in all the world there was none more beautiful. / It had an abbey inside, / of very religious folk.") The revelation of this identity comes only when they ask the locals ("*Icels ki erent del païs*") about the occupant of a richly decorated tomb that lies in the chapter room:

> *Cil comencerent a plurer*
> *E en plurant a recunter*
> *Que c'iert le mieudre chevalier*
> *E li plus forz e li plus fiers,*

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[188] Marie, *Yonec*, 214 (lines 446-447).
[189] There may be shades here of the classical conception of Hades.
[190] Marie, *Yonec*, 216 (lines 481-484).

Li plus beaus e li plus amez
Ki jamés seit el secle nez.
De ceste tere ot esté reis,
Unques ne fu nul si curteis.
A Caruënt fu entrepris,
Pur l'amur de une dame ocis.
'Unques puis n'eümes seignur,
Ainz avum atendu meint jur
Un fiz que en la dame engendra,
Si cum il dist e cumanda.'[191]

(These began to cry, / and in crying to recount / that he was the best knight, / and the strongest and the most valiant, / the fairest, and the most beloved / who had ever been born in the world. / He had been king of this land, / and there had never been one so courtly. / At Caerwent he was waylaid, / slain for the love of a lady. / 'Since then we have had no lord; / rather, we have long awaited / a son that he sired upon the lady, / as he told and commanded us.')

Muldumarec's reputation has apparently not suffered in the intervening years, the memory of his death once again provoking an outpouring of grief. But his realm has changed drastically. From an opulent otherworld, accessed via underground tunnel, it has become a quotidian neighboring fiefdom. There is no sign of the immense fleet that linked it to other realms, and while still surpassingly beautiful, there is no mention of the buildings' silver coating—it has quite literally lost its sheen. In assimilating to South Wales, the realm has even retroactively shed its earlier alterity. Its people now assert that Muldumarec was born *el secle*, "in [this] world." Yet the castle still remains oddly suspended from history, as it awaits its true lord.

In this enduring allegiance, Sharon Kinoshita detects "an allegory of native resistance to colonial rule, figured as the romantic desire for a scion of the occluded civilization."[192] Michael Faletra concurs, having figured Muldumarec's independent realm beside (or within?) Caerleon as

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[191] Marie, *Yonec,* 218 (lines 513-526).
[192] Kinoshita, *Boundaries*, 106.

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"a vibrant threat to Anglo-Norman colonial fantasies."[193] For him, Muldumarec "represents the indigene, the colonized who will not go away, the return of the repressed," while his kingdom is "an island of native sovereignty amid colonized territory." In this reading, the *lai*'s conclusion renders this refugium "localizable, historical, mappable, and ripe for conquest and colonization… [T]he once intangible land under the hill becomes another stopping place on the road back to the garrison at Caerleon. Therein, I think, lies the tragedy of this *lai*."[194]

Both of these readings see the inheritance of a once supernatural domain by a partly-mortal hero as a tragic act of colonization. Yet as I have suggested, the simple equating of parahumans with (in this case) the Welsh is a flawed premise. Marie's multiple reminders of her poem's setting in an ancient past further militate against it being a straightforward commentary on twelfth-century border politics. And a more open attitude towards the substance of otherworld beings suggests alternate interpretations. The inherited kingdom remains unnamed, hinting perhaps at the transference of an aristocratic bloodline into a nebulous and unmappable elsewhere, as fully realized in the poems analyzed in the second part of this chapter. More reservedly but perhaps no less radical, Yonec's heritage constitutes the insertion of an irreducible otherness into noble conquering lineages, a homely otherness that surges powerfully and defiantly into view. The parahuman identity that Yonec discovers at his father's tomb becomes a claim of alterity that subverts the dominant narrative of the *advocatus*, refuses co-option, and establishes a subaltern solidarity that extends beyond the boundaries of normative being.

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[193] Faletra, "Chivalric Identity," 30.
[194] Faletra, "Chivalric Identity," 34-35.

<u>Narrative Crafts</u>

Yonec's identity emerges from narratives that reach into the past to effect present action. The locals' narrative of their king's death represents the penultimate instance of this diegetic storytelling, a device that, as in *Guigemar*, makes the characters self-conscious participants in their own narratives. In *Yonec*, however, these are often less retrospective than prophetic, recapitulating plot points that have yet to occur. While traces of this prescience shade the woman's summons of her otherworldly lover, it is Muldumarec who provides the first explicit prophecy, just after the couple has first slept together. Referring to the lady's decrepit chaperone, the hawk-knight warns:

> *Ceste vielle nus traïra,*
> *E nuit e jur nus gaitera;*
> *Ele parcevra nostre amur,*
> *S'il cuntera a sun seignur.*
> *Si ceo avient cum jeo vus di*
> *E nus seium issi trahi,*
> *Ne m'en puis mie departir*
> *Que mei n'en estuce murir.*[195]

> (This old woman will betray us. / Night and day she will watch us; / she will perceive our love, and tell of it to her lord. If this happens as I tell you, / and we are thus betrayed, / I will not be able to escape at all, / for I'll have no choice but to die.)

While the second half of this speech is couched in the hypothetical, no counterfactual is offered, and the couple take no steps to avert this disaster. The open possibility of the final subjunctive is undermined by its content—*estovoir murir*, to have to die. The couple's unreflective hurtling through their joy towards their destruction is contrasted with the villainous husband's scheming. As Muldumarec predicts, he sets the old woman to spy on his strangely

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[195] Marie, *Yonec*, 202 (lines 203-210).

rejuvenated prisoner; learning of the shapeshifter's visit, "*Des engins faire fu hastifs / A ocire le chevalier*"[196] ("he rushed to make devices / to slay the knight.") These *engins*—inventions, traps, schemes—are successful in the short term, impaling the hawk-knight and ending his wife's infidelity. But these complex plots are powerless against the longer game of the narrative, as the dying knight reveals to his lover that:

> *De lui est enceinte d'enfant.*
> *Un fiz avra, pruz e vaillant;*
> *Icil la recunforterat.*
> *Yönec numer le ferat.*
> *Il vengerat e lui e li*
> *Il oscirat sun enemi.*[197]
>
> (By him she is pregnant with a child. / She will have a son, brave and strong; / he will console her. / She will name him Yonec. / He will avenge both him and her. / He will slay her[/his] enemy.)

The simple future tense here circumvents any sense of choice. The present fact of her pregnancy necessitates all that will follow, up to and including a vengeance for both "him and her" that (accurately) suggests she will die before Yonec accomplishes this vendetta. In fact, she seems to die several times in the course of the poem. Besides her journey through the grave mound, there is the moment when, after she sees her wounded lover and faints, "*Tute fu morte une loëe*"[198] ("For a moment she was completely dead.") These cumulative experiences of death, like the cumulative reiterations of the story to come, seem to fortify her through the long years of her ordeal; to complete her removal from time and into a different mode of being. The audience, furthermore, is invited to share in this: as the woman weeps over her dying lover in his hidden realm, Muldumarec recounts the entire end of the poem in considerable detail (lines 427-436),

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[196] Marie, *Yonec*, 206 (lines 284-285).
[197] Marie, *Yonec*, 208 (lines 327-332).
[198] Marie, *Yonec*, 208 (line 324).

mentioning the abbey they will visit, the tomb they will see (his own), the account they will hear of his death, the account the woman will give of her son's birth, and the sword she will give to Yonec; then, "*Asez verrunt k'il en fera*"[199] ("Indeed they will see what he will do about it.") Since Muldumarec has already told the woman that her son "will slay her[/his] enemy," even this ominous hint has nothing obscure about it.

The woman and the audience are thus well aware of what will happen when the traveling family visits the roadside abbey. Only two characters remain in ignorance: Yonec, innocent of his true identity, and the husband, his memory of any discord erased by the magic ring gifted to the woman for that purpose by her dying lover. Like the cauldron in *Branwen*, the otherworldly treasure from Muldumarec's realm reconfigures time when brought into use in the world above. The ring overwrites a true history with a contingently convenient fiction upon which the *advocatus* bases his feudal and sexual power. It is also a far more plausible story, a simple genealogical account of filiation that in the end proves no match for a bizarre tale of parahuman love.

Rupert T. Pickens notes that sex and storytelling are thoroughly interlinked throughout the poem. The lady "is impregnated by the knight born in thoughts enlivened by literary precedents, and she gives birth to the future hero." Both "mother and generator of text," she ultimately "dies in 'giving birth' to the lai of *Yonec*." Muldumarec "inseminates text" into her with his prophecies, "[b]ut the mother's final discursive act in *Yonec* brings with it as well the qualities of insemination, for just as important as the act of giving birth to Yonec [the hero] and to *Yonec* [the poem] is the fact that the lady instills her words in her son, in order to produce the explosive vengeance…"[200] It is here, in the moment of revelation, that Yonec sides not with the father-figure he has known

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[199] Marie, *Yonec*, 214 (line 436).
[200] Pickens, "Body Poetic," 147-149.

all his life, but with the claims of the unknown—the shapechanging, seductive outlander. Forced to confront his mixed human-parahuman ancestry in wrestling with the traumatic complexities of his birth, he sides decisively with the latter. The stakes of this decision are clear, as the conclusion clearly delineates the network of relationships brought together and shattered in Yonec's violent outburst: "*Quant sis fiz veit que morte fu, / Sun parastre ad le chief tolu; / De l'espeie ki fu sun pere / Ad dunc vengié lui e sa mere*"[201] ("When her son saw that she was dead, / he cut off his stepfather's head / with the sword that had belonged to his father, / and so avenged both him and his mother.")

A long-buried narrative transfigures a *pere* into a *parastre*, and a stranger into a beloved father. The wicked old man's lineage is replaced by supernatural one. Some commentators have remarked that the supernatural seems to leech out of *Yonec* as the *lai* goes on: "Plus on avance dans cette histoire, plus le surnaturel féerique s'estompe."[202] But the shocking conclusion is only explicable in magical terms. And the poem mentions only that Yonec inherits Muldumarec's kingdom, leaving Laurence Harf to evince some doubt as to whether Yonec will reign "dans ce monde ou dans l'autre,"[203] Indeed, Aisling Byrne seems to understand that Yonec "becomes king of the fairy realm," and makes no mention of the blending that has occurred along the border between terrestrial and paraterrestrial geographies.[204] In this ambiguity, the fluctuating strangeness of Muldumarec and his subjects reveals its powerful versatility. As parahumans, these beings and their land vacillate between virtually complete congruence with humans and the human world and a baffling alterity. In this, Marie seems to suggest, they embody the *jadis* in which she insists her poem is set. In the final lines, she again emphasizes the distance of time separating herself from

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[201] Marie, *Yonec,* 220 (lines 543-546).
[202] Dubost, "Yonec," 465.
[203] Harf, "La Reine," 106.
[204] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 56.

her material: "*Cil ki ceste aventure oïrent / Lunc tens après un lai en firent*"[205] ("Those who heard of this adventure / a long time after, made a *lai* of it"). These *lais*, Marie's prologue has made clear, are themselves now on the verge of extinction, necessitating her refashionings. At the end of *Yonec*, at its plot's inception, and in the broader literary project of which it is a part, near-forgotten stories surge into expectant presents. The latent forces they stir up—fertility, violence, the interfacing of disparate worlds—tear apart family affiliations, structures of power, and consensus accounts of how things came to be, only to reconstitute them differently. In this, the tales resemble the uncanny beings who are not only their subjects but their instigators as well.

3. Insomniac Otherness in *Tydorel*

A royal couple are happily married but childless. One day, the queen goes on a picnic with her servants, but awakes alone. A handsome stranger appears, declares his love for her, and issues vague threats if she does not consent. She gives in, but asks to know who he is. Rather than answering, he rides with her to a lake, deposits her on the shore, and proceeds to ride his horse into the water, down below the waves, and, at long last, emerges on the other side. His alterity thus established, he and the queen begin an affair. When they are at last discovered, the stranger vanishes, leaving the woman pregnant. Her son is born with a complete inability to sleep. Unaware that this condition is anything unusual, he inherits the throne, always entertained through the night by men brought in on corvée from the surrounding populace to tell him stories. But eventually, a young man is hauled in who knows no stories. Instead, he recounts a proverb, that those who cannot sleep are not truly human. The king is shocked and demands the truth from his mother. She

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[205] Marie, *Yonec*, 220 (lines 555-556).

reveals his real parentage; he mounts his horse, rides to his father's lake, and vanishes forever into the waters.

Tydorel is an anonymous text, surviving only in a single manuscript, though a partial translation into Old Norse suggests that it enjoyed some degree of popularity.[206] Barbara Hillers, re-examining an old proposal by Alexander Krappe, notes that the plot corresponds closely to "The Man Who Never Slept," an Irish folktale (type 2412 D) quite common throughout the island but unknown elsewhere. This localization is peculiar, but the notion that it represents a native story is complicated by the fact that the French *Tydorel* long predates any extant Irish version. The notion that the story was introduced to Ireland by the Anglo-Normans, perhaps in the form of the poem itself, is thus "an eminently sensible suggestion"; but "while this is an attractive possibility, it is not the only one, and we have no conclusive proof for either the Celtic or Anglo-Norman origin argument."[207]

While the exact chronological relationship of *Tydorel* to Marie's oeuvre is impossible to pin down, it is widely supposed to be somewhat later, part of a vogue that Marie instigated for romantic, supernatural, or supernaturally romantic tales set in *Bretaingne* (in *Tydorel*, generally understood to mean Brittany.) With its interest in the psychological stakes of otherworldly liaisons, both for the human partner and for the part-human child who results, *Tydorel* seems to take up themes from *Yonec* specifically. Though acknowledging similarities, Francis Dubost sees the supernatural as occupying a fundamentally different place in *Tydorel* than it does in *Yonec*: "Dieu est absent du lai de *Tydorel* et cette absence rend le surnatural problematique,"[208] he writes,

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[206] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook. "Introduction [to *Tydorel*]," in *French Arthurian Literature, Volume IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 301.

[207] Barbara Hillers, "The Man Who Never Slept (MLSIT 4082): A Survey of the Redactions and Their Relation to the *Lai de Tydorel*," *Béaloideas*, Iml. 59, *The Fairy Hill Is on Fire! Proceedings of the Symposium on the Supernatural in Irish and Scottish Migratory Legends* (1991): 101.

[208] Dubost, "Yonec," 454.

referring to the lack of any scene equivalent to Muldumarec's disguised communion. The fairy lover in *Tydorel* doesn't come in answer to any direct prayer; the woman seems to have a happy marriage besides her childlessness. But in removing the character of the villainous husband, and so the motivation of revenge, *Tydorel* both simplifies the story and turns it inward. Without an abusive marital hell to escape from, the woman's relationship to her lover and his parahumanity becomes far more ambivalent. Where Yonec is immediately able to weaponize his true ancestry to achieve justice, Tydorel can only turn the consequences of this revelation upon himself. And while *Yonec* imagines narrative as a liberatory device capable of reconfiguring history, Tydorel finds that the stories that have long assuaged his insomnia are powerless against the single fact of his otherness.

Unspeakable Alterity

Rather than calling out for supernatural intervention, the queen seems to draw it to herself through a cluster of signs that anticipate her fate. Visiting the orchard, she and her maidens gorge themselves on fruit ("*Li plusor ont mengié du fruit. / La roïne s'apesanti*," "Most of them ate the fruit; / the queen became heavy.") This heaviness prefigures her pregnancy while also alluding to Edenic notions of female vulnerability to sinister influence. She then rests beneath "*une ente*," a grafted fruit tree, whose hybrid nature suggests generally an artificial union of disparate entities and specifically her son, whose chimeric body will host two natures that ultimately prove incompatible. The queen drifts off to sleep "*Sor une meschine apuiee*" ("resting against a maiden,") a gesture pointing to the queer affinities of those humans who become enmeshed with the parahuman. Finally, when she awakes, it is to an eerie absence: "*Et la roïne s'esveilla. / Aprés les*

autres volt aler, / Mes n'en porra nule trover; / Molt durement s'en merveilla[209] ("And the queen awoke. / She wished to go after the others, / but couldn't find any of them; / she wondered greatly at this.") The disappearance of her retinue is no more inherently supernatural than the grafted tree, and the suggestive nature of these moments does not cohere into any single spell or taboo-breaking mistake that conjures the otherworldly. Rather, signifiers of the uncanny accumulate, generating an air of unease that will not lift for the remainder of the poem.

Similarly, the arrival of the otherworldly knight is not the reality-shifting metamorphosis that occurs in *Yonec*:

> *Contreval le jardín garda,*
> *Si vit .I. chevalier venir*
> *Soëf le pas, tout a loisir.*
> *Ce fu li plus biaus hon du mont*
> *De toz iceus qui ore i sont;*
> *De raineborc estoit vestuz,*
> *Genz ert et granz et bien membruz.*[210]
>
> (She looked down the garden, / and saw a knight coming, / his pace easy, completely at leisure. / He was the most beautiful man in the world, / of all those who are now living there; / he was dressed in Regensburg cloth; / he was noble and tall and well-formed.")

His exceptional beauty and foreign dress notwithstanding, there is nothing particularly unearthly in the knight's appearance. The queen notes this, but there seems to be a mismatch between her rational assessment of him and her sense that something is not as it should be:

> *Quant el le voit venir vers soi,*
> *Grant honte en ot et grant esfroi;*
> *.I. poi s'estut et si pensa.*
> *Savez que la dame cuida?*
> *Que ce fust aucun riche ber*

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[209] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, eds. *Tydorel*, in *French Arthurian Literature, Volume IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 326 (lines 28-30, 32, and 36-39).
[210] *Tydorel*, 326-328 (lines 40-46).

Qui fust venuz au roi parler,
Et quant il le roi ne trovast
Qu'a li venist, sel saluast.[211]

(When she saw him coming towards her, / she was very ashamed and very frightened; / for a moment she stood and thought. / Do you know what the lady believed? / That this was some rich lord / who had come to speak with the king, / and when he didn't find the king, / he had come to her, and greeted her.)

The poem here leads us through both her instinctive reaction and her attempt to calm herself. She recognizes that there is no real need for her to be overcome with shame or fear; that this impression seems explicitly at odds with the rider's arresting beauty and noble ("gentle," in the antiquated sense) bearing. With a rhetorical question, the narrator presents her rationalization while cueing the audience to its falsehood; the verb *cuider* can specifically imply an incorrect assumption. Notably, however, the text will flesh out no alternate identity for the knight. His motive is revealed to be different—desire for the queen rather than conversation with the king—but he is never named, never called anything other than *chevalier*, *ber*, or *hon*. Besides his prophecy, his only explicitly fantastical act will be the one that takes him out of sight, into a yawning unknown. The knight's otherworldliness, as so often in these poems, is unstated, an open secret hanging over the text that no character seems able or willing to articulate. *Tydorel*, more than similar works, highlights both this unspeakable nature of the parahuman and the terror this resistance to verbal expression inspires in those brought into intimate contact with it.

This intimacy is instigated with yet another ambiguously uncanny sign: "*Li chevaliers cortoisement / Par la main senestre le prent*"[212] ("The knight courteously / took her by the left hand.") The juxtaposition of *cortoisement* and *la main senestre* constitutes an oxymoron; Dubost

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[211] *Tydorel*, 328 (lines 48-54).
[212] *Tydorel*, 328 (lines 55-56).

notes that this alludes to demonic influence, since to take the left hand in a medieval context was both to invert courtly custom and to provoke associations with Judas and the devil.[213] Here, the knight seems almost to dare the queen to realize his alterity, even as he declares his reason for coming:

> '*Dame*', *fet il, 'ci sui venuz*
> *Por vos que molt aim et desir.*
> …
> *Je vos ameré loiaument,*
> *Et si ne puet estre autrement,*
> *Je m'en irai, vos remaindrez;*
> *Sachiez, ja mes joie n'avrez.*'[214]

> ('Lady,' he said, I have come here / for you, whom I greatly love and desire. / … / I will love you loyally, / and if[/since] it cannot be otherwise, / I will go, and you will remain; / know that you will never be happy.')

While Muldumarec, in loving his lady from afar, was reciprocating her inchoate desire and prefiguring their union, the knight's desire here is one-sided, almost predatory. And while couched in courtly language, his proposition culminates in an ominous threat. As Dubost points out, his *si* in line 66 is dangerously ambiguous. Taken as a conditional ("if"), it seems to place upon the queen a terrible and unasked-for choice; taken as a conjunction ("and," "since"), it dooms her to unhappiness.[215] Even before the knight's fundamental otherness is confirmed, encountering him has irrevocably altered the queen's life. Yet despite this, he never quite shades into villainy, slipping in and out of narrative categories as defiantly as he rejects naming. The text again uses the queen's conflicted affective state to encapsulate this uncanniness; as she looks at him, "*Angoisseusement l'aama*"[216] ("she loved him in anguish.")

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[213] Dubost, "Yonec," 455.
[214] *Tydorel*, 328 (lines 58-59 and 65-68).
[215] Dubost, "Yonec," 458.
[216] *Tydorel*, 328 (line 71).

The poem here distinguishes between two ways of loving: the queen's instinctive, internal, and conflicted attraction, and a negotiated, outward, contractual relationship:

> *Otroie li qu'el l'amera,*
> *S'ele seüst qui il estoit,*
> *Coment ot non et dont venoit.*
> *'Par foi', fet il, 'je vos dirai,*
> *Noient ne vos en mentirai.*
> *Venez o moi, si le verrez,*
> *Car j[a] autrement nu savrez.*'[217]

> (She swore that she would love him, / if she might know who he was, / what his name was, and where he came from. / 'By faith,' he said, 'I will tell you, / I will not lie to you about this at all. / Come with me, and you will see, / for you will never know otherwise.')

In attempting to gain a measure of control over the situation, the queen offers to trade her love for knowledge, an exchange that acquires its value from her sense that his answers will be more than mundane. But despite his promise of transparency, only her third question, about his origins, will receive some kind of answer. His insistence on demonstration rather than narration seems to acknowledge the slipperiness of words—seeing the truth, she will have no grounds for suspecting a lie. This suspicion of story will haunt the poem and bring about its climax. Yet in the event, what the queen witnesses will unmoor rather than ground her. It will confirm only that she has become entangled with an entity whose relation to being, breath, and time is so different from hers that it surpasses and negates language.

Just before the knight demonstrates his aquatic affiliation, the narrator offers a comment on the lake itself:

> *Desoz .I. tertre lé et grant*
> *L'a descendue, sor .I. lai*
> *Ou plusor firent lor essai:*
> *Qui le lac peüst tresnoer,*

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[217] *Tydorel*, 328 (lines 72-78).

Ja ne seüst de cuer penser
Nule chose qu'il ne l'eüst.
Et qanque desirrast seüst.[218]

(Below a broad, tall mound, / he set her down on the shore of a lake / where many people made their attempt: / whoever could swim across the lake / could never imagine in his heart / anything that he would not have. / And he would know whatever he desired.)

The *tertre*, like the *hoge* in *Yonec*, likely indicates a prehistoric burial mound, though *Tydorel* again brings this uncanny element into play through association rather than direct engagement. The tumulus lends its supernatural quality to the wish- and knowledge-granting lake, though nothing more is made of this association. The promise of absolute knowledge that the lake holds out is denied to the audience, as it is denied to the many seekers who attempt to accomplish its legendary challenge. These are doomed to fail in their efforts, it seems; all except for the knight:

Tot el cheval el lac se mist.
 L'eve li clot desus le front,
Et il se met el plus parfont.
Qatre loees i estut
…
De l'autre part est fors issuz,
Si est a la dame venuz.
'Dame', fet il, 'desoz cest bois
Par ceste voie vien et vois.
Ne me demandez noient plus.[219]

(All on horseback he threw himself into the lake. / The water closed over his brow, / and he plunged into the deepest depths. / He remained there for four leagues. / … / On the other bank he came out, / and came back to the lady. / 'Lady,' he said, 'beneath this wood, / by this path I come and go. / Do not ask anything more of me.')

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[218] *Tydorel*, 330 (lines 92-98).
[219] *Tydorel*, 330 (lines 100-109).

The knight accomplishes easily what others can only attempt in vain; he implies that this miraculous feat is merely his daily commute. Thanks to his amphibious nature, he has gained access to the even more inhuman powers granted by the lake, claiming his desires at will (witness his virtually instant seduction of the queen) and possessing a perfect awareness of the future, judging by the prophecy he then delivers. The first part of this foretelling summarizes much of the remainder of the poem, including the birth of Tydorel and his sister; the remainder scries down the sister's lineage to a pair of Breton counts, Alan and his son Conan. Since these characters play no role in the plot, they are generally presumed to be important political figures in the context of the poem's composition: perhaps patrons, or the ancestors of patrons. Given the ubiquity of these two names among the Breton nobility of this era, however, an exact identification is probably impossible.[220] Notably absent from this prophecy, however, is any mention of Tydorel's ambiguous fate. His insomnia and its narrative palliation are predictable results of his partly otherworld ancestry. But his reaction to the revelation of that ancestry is either unknowable or remains hidden; kept, at the very least, from his mother and from the audience.

This is all the information that the knight provides. He is remarkably miserly with his unlimited knowledge, and secretive; his promise to reveal his name is completely unfulfilled, even as he names his unborn son. Where *Guigemar* and *Yonec* both dramatize the expanded worlds opened through parahuman encounter, *Tydorel* suggests that human access to these zones is only ever fogged, contingent on the whims of unknowable consciousnesses, morally fraught and potentially fatal. When the boy Tydorel is born, the peasants whisper about his bastardy while the king remains ignorant;[221] when a wounded knight spies the adulterous couple, the

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[220] Burgess and Brook lay out a range of hypotheses in Burgess and Brook, "Introduction [to *Tydorel*]," 308-309.
[221] *Tydorel*, 332 (lines 165-170).

otherworldly man disappears forever after first ensuring that the voyeur suffers and dies: "*Et cil amaladi le jor / Et empoira de sa dolor; / L'endemain a eure fina / Que il les vit et esgarda*"[222] ("And that one sickened that day, / and his pain worsened; / the next day he died the same hour / that he had seen and watched them.") The supernatural knight's ability to manifest his will strikes down an enemy, but it also preserves the king's blissful unawareness that alterity has infiltrated and usurped his bloodline.

In this, as in the boy Tydorel's insomnia, the parahuman aspects of this poem manifest as fundamentally parasitic. From the moment the prince is born, "*Onques des eulz ne someilla, / Ne ne dormi, tot jors veilla; / A grant merveille l'ont tenu / Tuit si homme qui l'ont veü*"[223] ("He never closed his eyes in rest, / nor slept, but always remained awake; / this was held to be a great marvel / by all his men who witnessed it.") There seems to have been a medieval idea that demons couldn't sleep; it was argued, for instance, that Merlin couldn't have had diabolical parentage, since stories mentioned him sleeping.[224] Francis Dubost follows Jean Frappier in seeing Tydorel's sleeplessness as connecting him "avec une conception magique du temps, un signe d'intemporalité ou d'éternité. Le porteur de ce signe se trouverait alors soustrait à la loi du temps…"[225] Frappier specifically describes this alternate temporality as equivalent to "le temps mythique," creating "un jour continu, sans alternance diurne et nocturne."[226] Whether or not this time is more "mythic" than others, it is certainly aberrant, a weirded relation to time that extends from the prince out to those he demands stay up with him.

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[222] *Tydorel*, 334 (lines 215-218).
[223] *Tydorel*, 332-334 (lines 179-182).
[224] Dubost, "Yonec," 463.
[225] Dubost, "Yonec," 461.
[226] Jean Frappier, "A propos du lai de Tydorel et de ses éléments mythiques," in *Mélanges de linguistique française et de philologie médiévales offerts à Monsieur Paul Imbs*, ed. Robert Martin and Georges Straka (Strasbourg: Centre de Philologie et de Littératures Romanes, 1973), 584.

<u>The Failure of Story</u>

Tydorel's all-nighters are fueled by entertainment that is almost always specified as narrative: "*Face .I. homme prendre, a son tor, / Qui chant et face grant baudor, / Et si li cont aucune rien*"[227] ("Have a man taken, each in turn, / who will sing and make many jokes, / and will tell him any kind of story"), his father recommends in the prophecy. The narrator again mentions this in describing how the child is raised; each night, "*Firent o lui veillier la gent / Chascune nuit diversement. / Fables contoient et respit*"[228] ("they made people stay up with him, / different ones every night, / and told him tales and exempla.") These stories, it seems, distract him from his own aberrant time by immersing him in the contained, renewable, and always-already strange chronotopes of fiction. When Tydorel becomes an adult, holding court in Nantes, he does not outgrow his childhood preferences: "*Prenoient hommes chascun jor, / Einsi comme il venoit en tor, / Qui o le roi la nuit veillassent, / Fables deïssent et contassent*"[229] ("They would take men each night, / as each one's turn came up / who would stay up the night with the king / recounting and telling tales.") The next line echoes this verb in an unusual first-person allusion to the narration itself—"*.I. samedi oï conter…*"[230] ("one Saturday, I heard it told…) This intrusion signals the break in Tydorel's story-telling customs that is critical for the resolution of *Tydorel* the poem: the goldsmith's apprentice who refuses this bizarre draft, protesting, "*Onques n'en soi ne tant ne quant. / Je ne sai fable ne chançon, / Ne bien conter une reson*"[231] ("I know absolutely nothing about this sort of thing. / I know no tales nor fables, / nor how to tell a story well.")

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[227] *Tydorel*, 330 (lines 127-129).
[228] *Tydorel*, 334 (lines 185-187).
[229] *Tydorel*, 336 (lines 241-244).
[230] *Tydorel*, 336 (line 245).
[231] *Tydorel*, 336 (lines 268-270).

In the king's presence, the apprentice excuses his lack of stories by appeal to his rough circumstances—his father's early death, his mother's poverty, and his lack of worldly experience. Tales, he implies, are a luxury that people like him cannot afford, gesturing as they do to realities beyond his constrained and contingent existence. When threatened again, though, he repeats the proverb his mother supplied him to confront the king's narrative tyranny: "*Por verité, que n'est pas d'ome / Qui ne dort ne qui ne prent somme*"[232] ("By truth, he is no man / who does not sleep nor take rest.")

Like a spell, this simple statement has a dramatic effect upon the young king.

> *Molt angoisseusement pensa*
> *D'ice qu'il onques ne dormi.*
> *Bien set que cil avoit oï*
> *Qu'il n'estoit mie d'ome nez.*
> *Dolenz en est et trespensez*
> *Que toz li mondes reposoit*
> *Et il par nuit et jor veilloit.*[233]
>
> (He thought in great anguish, / about the fact that he never slept. / He knew well the boy had heard / that he was not born of man at all. / He became sorrowful and anxious / that all the world rested / and he by night and day stayed awake.)

This adverb, *angoisseusement*, is the same used at the poem's beginning to describe the queen's falling in love with her semiaquatic knight. The pain here is again one of a split awareness, this time between Tydorel's perpetual insomnia, which he has never thought unusual, and the glaring aporia it exposes in his heritage: he is both non-legitimate and non-human. But it is also a shock of loneliness. His otherness sets him apart from "*toz liz mondes*," prevents him from sharing or even understanding essentials of human existence: dreams, fatigue, awakening, all of which structure both experiential time and imagination. The goldsmith's proverb forces

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[232] *Tydorel*, 340 (lines 329-330).
[233] *Tydorel*, 340 (lines 332-338).

Tydorel to abandon fiction in demanding one final story from his mother: the truth of his conception.

Her recital is given in exhaustive detail (lines 361-474.) Though it occupies about a quarter of the entire poem, the mother's perspective is not significantly different than the narrator's has been, though there are fissures and interesting additions. In general, the knight appears as a more sinister figure in her account, coercive and withholding ("*Menaça moi*," "he threatened me"; "*Et mainte foiz me desfendi / Por ma vie bien me gardasse / Que je plus ne li demandasse / De son estre…*"[234] "And many times he forbade me, / if I wished to save my life, / from asking him anything more / about his being...") And while she has him specify that he journeys to her "*De son païs*"[235] ("from his land"), implying a separate submarine realm, she provides no guess as to what he (and so her son) might be, if not a man. It is as if she has taken on her former lover's logic, at once demonstrative and unspeakable: the image of the man submerging into the lake is so powerful an indication of alterity that, whether witnessed or heard recounted, it is as clear an assertion of parahumanity as her son's sleeplessness.

As soon as she is done, Tydorel—like Yonec, at a similar moment of revelation—takes immediate and decisive action:

> *Sitost comme il se fu armez,*
> *Sor son cheval estoit montez;*
> *Poignant en est au lai venuz,*
> *El plus parfont s'est enz feruz.*
> *Illec remest, en tel maniere,*
> *Que puis ne retorna ariere.*[236]

> (As soon as he had armed himself, / he mounted his horse; / spurring on, he arrived at the lake, / then threw himself into the deepest part. / There he remained, in such a way / that from then on he did not return.)

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[234] *Tydorel*, 342 (line 390) and 344 (lines 438-441).
[235] *Tydorel*, 344 (line 426).
[236] *Tydorel*, 346 (lines 483-488).

It is entirely in keeping with the narrator's aesthetic of refusal that it is left ambiguous whether Tydorel drowns, tragically confirming his essential humanity; or abandons his mother's realm for his father's, defiantly accepting his alterity by refusing a human world in which he will be forever marked as other. Unlike Muldumarec's kingdom, this submarine realm "reste un espace mystérieux, jamais décrit, inaccessible aux simples mortels comme à la narration."[237] The limits of narrative, Dubost suggest, align in this poem with the limitations of the imagination: "Le malaise fantastique du lai de *Tydorel* résulte d'un refus des solutions peut-être trop faciles du merveilleux."[238] No justice is accomplished by Tydorel's realization of his fundamental alterity, and the story he leaves behind is a telling marked by all the things it cannot relate. The parahuman here is a force that wells up to swallow any reassuring attempt at mediation between incommensurates, up to and including the ostensible fiction of the tale itself. The past it imagines is one whose lacunae are either irrecoverable or impossible to survive hearing.

Yet the poem still explicitly links its characters to the context of its composition, through the inconspicuous daughter and her progeny. History, like Tydorel's body, is unrecoverable yet ever present. It remains (*Illec remest*), lurking, promising inhuman power to any who would follow on its trail. Through Tydorel's disappearance into the depths, this tale thus reveals its close thematic links to *Lanval, Graelent*, and *Guingamor*, the "fairy mistress" poems considered next.

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[237] Dubost, "Yonec," 459.
[238] Dubost, "Yonec," 467.

Part II.

Lovers Occulted: *Lanval*, *Graelent*, and *Guingamor*

Even more than for the *Roman de Rou* cited at the beginning of this chapter, Wace is

remembered for his *Roman de Brut*, a translation and adaptation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's

Historia Regum Britanniae. Appearing some two decades after its model's completion in the

mid-1130's, the *Roman de Brut* transforms Geoffrey's sober Latin prose into rollicking

octosyllabic verse in Wace's Normannic *langue d'oïl*. This shift made Wace's version a key

source for subsequent romancers, including Marie and Chrétien de Troyes.

The centerpiece of Wace's poem, like that of his model, is the reign of Arthur, who in

these texts becomes a fifth/sixth-century warrior king who builds a vast empire in defiance of the

documentary record. If Geoffrey established the canonical outline of Arthur's downfall, Wace

provides the emotional coloring through his emphasis on the king's hubris, the loss of his

comrades in endless war, and the adulterous love triangle that ultimately shatters his empire. In

the almost constant combat and bloodshed of these closing segments, it can sometimes be easy to

lose sight of Wace's consistently developed theme: that a kingdom built on deep homosocial

bonds, such as those of the Round Table, can be both invincible in battle and fatally vulnerable

as those bonds are weakened by desire or death. Mortal frailty undermines ambitious imperial

projects, reveals that their ideological obsession with eternity and unity is constantly threatened

by human impermanence and distance. In keeping with this heightened sense of tragedy, Wace

significantly amplifies his source text when he comes to the conclusion of Arthur's final battle at

Camble and the king's occultation into Avalon.

The poet begins with a fairly straightforward translation of what Geoffrey provides:

"*Arthur, si la geste ne ment, / Fud el cors nafrez mortelment; / Em Avalon se fist porter / Pur ses*

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plaies mediciner"[239] ("Arthur, if the account does not lie, / was mortally wounded in the flesh; / he had himself carried into Avalon / to have his wounds tended.") The only addition here is the parenthetical qualification of his source's reliability, though Wace gives no alternate possibility to frame his skepticism. If the account does lie, the reader is left with no recourse, besides the depressingly prosaic possibility that Arthur may have simply died.

Then come twelve lines with no counterpart in Geoffrey:

> *Encore i est, Bretun l'atendent,*
> *Si cum il dient e entendent,*
> *De la vendra, encor puet vivre.*
> *Maistre Wace, qui fist cest libre,*
> *Ne volt plus dire de sa fin*
> *Qu'en dist li prophetes Merlin;*
> *Merlin dist d'Arthur, si ot dreit*
> *Que sa mort dutuse serreit.*
> *Lis prophetes dis verité;*
> *Tut tens en ad l'um puis duté,*
> *E dutera, ço crei, tut dis,*
> *Se il est morz u il est vis.*[240]

> (He is still there, Britons await him, / so they say and understand; / he'll come from there, he may still live. / Master Wace, who made this book / wishes to say no more of his end / than what the prophet Merlin said about it: / Merlin said of Arthur, if he was right, / that his death would be uncertain. / The prophet tells the truth; / ever since then, people have been uncertain, / and will continue to be, I believe, forever, / whether he is dead or he is alive.)

In these couplets, Wace layers conditionals upon qualifications, tenuous attributions upon evasions, and so avoids making a definitive statement on either Arthur's current condition or the possibility of his return. He juxtaposes three authorities: the Britons, who assert that Arthur is still in Avalon, and await his return; Merlin, who prophesied truthfully that Arthur's death would

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[239] Wace, *Le Roman de Brut*, *Tome II*, ed. Ivor Arnold (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Françaises, 1940), 693 (lines 13275-13278).
[240] Wace, *Brut,* 693-694 (lines 13279-13290).

be "doubtful"; and Wace himself, who sides with Merlin's uncertainty and makes a prophecy of his own—not of Arthur's return, but of endless dispute over whether or not he *will* return.

Even more than this clash of sources, however, Wace highlights a clash of times. Virtually every line in the passage signals a change in tense, creating a dizzying mise-en-abîme of chronology and causality. From the narrative past of Arthur's demise, we are thrust into the present of British expectation, then the future of the king's return; then back to the immediate past of Wace's composition, followed by the suspended moment in which he remains unwilling to say any more than Merlin once *said*. Merlin's prophecy itself is then given in the conditional; finally comes a summative closing that juxtaposes all times against an eternally suspended state of doubt—men have always doubted, and will always doubt, whether Arthur *is* alive or dead.

Where Geoffrey's Arthur remained confined to the narrative past, Wace's becomes fundamentally illegible with regards to time. Even prophetic authority fails—Merlin insists not on some future Arthurian event but only on eternal Arthurian doubt. The hopeful Britons, in turn, envisage Arthur reappearing in order merely to live again—a curiously static verb for a conquering hero, and one which raises the fraught question of what he will have been doing in the meantime.

Two short subsequent passages, likewise with no counterpart in Geoffrey, add further complexity to Wace's depiction of Arthur's passing. As he bestows the realm upon his cousin Costentin of Cornuaille, Arthur commands him "*Qu'il fust reis tant qu'il revenist*"[241] ("that he be king until he [Arthur] might return.") Yet Arthur does not return within Costentin's short reign, or afterwards. His continued absence severs his pact with history; the remaining monarchs of the *Brut* do not seem much troubled by the prospect that Arthur might return to collect his receipts.

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[241] Wace, *Brut*, 694 (line 13298).

Their perspective is summarized effectively in Wace's description of the viewpoint of

Modred's two sons, looking upon the destruction of Camble. "*Cil virent tuz les baruns morz, /*

Virent peri lé granz esforz, / Virent d'Arthur l'esluinement"[242] ("These saw all the nobility dead,

/ they saw the grand endeavor perished, / they saw the distancing of Arthur.") Modred's children

understand what Arthur himself does not—that by going to Avalon, the king has removed

himself from the political equation. He has entered a different kind of history, one composed not

of regnal years and bodycounts but of messianic possibility. The realpolitik that ensues in

Britain—Modred's sons are in turn both murdered while seeking sanctuary in religious

buildings—serves to highlight Arthur's distance from his former kingdom.

Wace's word *esluinement*—spatial and/or temporal distancing—stands out here. This is a

concept of estrangement intimately related to time, from the precise date Wace provides for

Arthur's final battle (542 After the Incarnation) to the ever-receding yet ever-present moment of

his return. Conceptually, this idea of distance comes to structure heroes' relationships to

otherworldly geographies and times. This distancing in turn allows the otherworld to assimilate

the chivalric adventurer to its parahuman native population. As illustrated by Arthur's

suspension from historical progression, the principal change the hero undergoes is precisely the

altered relationship to time and space that is a leading characteristic of these beings.

Esluinement (*éloignement*, in Modern French) can refer to a distancing both "dans

l'espace" and "dans le temps." This ambiguity is key to understanding Wace's use of the word

and the concept he thus embeds into French literary imagination of the Brittonic past. Avalon

makes Arthur both distant and other-timed, part of a lost past or receding future but not of the

now. Even when taken purely in the temporal sense, though, *esluinement* still inscribes a spatial

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[242] Wace, *Brut,* 694 (lines 13301-13303.)

metaphor onto time. This was far from the only option available to medieval writers—Augustine famously describes time in affective terms.[243] But the spatial metaphor allows a particular kind of totalizing scheme. It entered the poetic vernacular, in which *siecle* means "world" as both a geographic and a temporal entity, with the latter sense only gradually winning out and becoming narrowed in meaning to "century." While medieval maps did not universally employ this scheme, numerous examples did—perhaps most famously the Hereford Mappamundi, where time (literalized as rivers) begins in the east and flows down towards the west; an image adapted by Walter Benjamin in his Ninth Thesis on history, which substitutes for these rivers a storm, irresistibly generating the detritus of events in the name of dubious progression.[244] This spatial metaphor serves both to make the past as accessible as a foreign country, and foreign lands as inaccessible as the past; a relational paradox to which otherworlds such as Avalon supply one possible solution.

In this context, *esluinement* is a technique by which a character might step outside the political imperatives of earthly space and time without entering an explicitly theological scheme—though Richard Firth Green has convincingly argued that medieval debates over purgatory borrowed heavily from contemporary discourse about fairylands.[245] In undergoing otherworldly distancing, heroes shed both their originary political affiliations and their mortality. This loss destabilizes their social and spiritual identities, and so entails a fundamental ontological shift. The distanced character becomes, like the other inhabitants of their new residence, parahuman.

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[243] See page 64.
[244] Benjamin, "Concept," 392.
[245] Green, *Elf Queens*, 188-193.

Wace includes no mention of agency in the Arthur's translation beyond this world, feminine or otherwise. But such associations proved irresistible to other tellers. The three texts considered below—Marie's *Lanval* and the anonymous *Graelent* and *Guingamor*—all effect noble occultation via an eroticized encounter with supernatural women. This gendering is noteworthy, and has occasioned a significant amount of critical attention as to how these beings differ from their male counterparts. Green notes that while male fairy lovers invade human space, female ones "must be sought at the untamed edges of the human lifeworld."[246] Their power is at once too great and too ineffable for the civilized structures and petty politics of court; it requires the generative ambiguity of border zones in order to manifest. Thus the parahuman women of these poems offer an embodied resistance to the totalizing claims of masculine feudal hierarchies. At the same time, Elizabeth S. Leet points out, "their otherness does not beget wildness: the fairy ladies demonstrate exemplary courtly manners…"[247] The supernatural women that Lanval, Graelent, and Guingamor encounter tend to lack the menacing qualities that male parahumans—even ultimately sympathetic ones, like Muldumarec—display (at least initially) to their mortal lovers.

But this does not leech these figures of complexity. James Wade argues that "…authors use fairy mistresses as embodied events, not only to provide erotic fulfillment and socioeconomic aid, but also, simultaneously, to provide unique forms of narrative tension and conflict."[248] This tension derives in large part from these women's mastery over wealth, space, and time, which overwhelms the ostensibly privileged position of their knightly lovers. Although

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[246] Green, *Elf Queens,* 100.
[247] Elizabeth S. Leet, "Objectification, Empowerment, and the Male Gaze in the Lanval Corpus," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 42, no. 1, *Special Issue: Gender and Status in the Medieval World* (Spring 2016): 78.
[248] Wade, *Fairies,* 111.

the premise of a beautiful stranger declaring her affections and making herself sexually available (often in exchange for a promise of secrecy) smacks of a "conspicuously masculine form of wish fulfillment," Green notes that in practice these texts play upon "the tension between the twin roles of the fairy mistress (as object of erotic desire and as agent of capricious power)."[249] Aisling Byrne sees these paired roles as entwined with the temporal alterity of the otherworld. The hero is drawn inexorably towards parahuman space, since "[a]s long as he continues to straddle the real world and the supernatural world, the stasis of fulfilled desire is problematic, and in a sense, dehumanizing since it is out-of-kilter with the trajectory of human existence in the temporally bound world." The otherworld time that the supernatural woman offers, in this conception, solves the problem that mortal impermanence poses for all narratives that seek closure, especially romantic ones. Ultimately, "[t]hese romances avoid the twin poles of puritanical anxiety and sensual fantasy by stressing that *this* world is not the natural place for unfettered gratification, but that another one might be."[250]

My own approach is to attend to the ways that these women—only ever identified by terms equally applicable to their fully mortal counterparts—relate parahuman existence to the human desire for other modes of being. For instance, the convention by which the parahuman woman knows the knight's name, but he never learns hers, establishes a subtle but immediate intimacy that is also a gendered power dynamic. While this knowledge may simply be attributed to the women's supernatural powers, this introduces something of a tautology based in presupposing that the women are *fées* and therefore possess a particular suite of abilities. It might just as easily be proposed that the women seem to possess memories of the men that the men do

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[249] Green, *Elf Queens,* 99-100.
[250] Aisling Byrne, "Fairy Lovers: Sexuality, Order and Narrative in Medieval Romance," in *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse, and Cory James Rushton (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 105-106; and *Otherworlds*, 47.

not share; in which case, this detail is another illustration of how these women exist in an altogether different relationship to time that permits them to draw their lovers out of legible history.

Likewise, the frequent device of the taboo—in both *Lanval* and *Graelent*, the woman's insistence that her lover not speak of their affair—wrenches the chivalric lover into a new cultural economy in which he is destined to demonstrate his shortcomings. James Wade notes that given the "impossibility of any equivalent reciprocity" for the otherworldly mistress's material gifts, the taboo comes to replace any direct reciprocation. While at first seeming insignificant, a simple verbal promise, this prohibition comes to assume overwhelming importance within the narrative.[251] Taboos in romance must be broken, both for narrative economy (why else mention them?) and also because otherwise, there would be no plot—everything would be too easy. These strictures, moreover, have no necessary relation to real cultural taboos; they are "entirely arbitrary injunction[s]", based not in real cultural ritual but in the autonomy of the parahuman herself.[252] In this, they reorient the default hegemony in which their lovers have hitherto operated. Barbara Fass Leavy suggests that for the supernatural woman operating within earthly patriarchy, the taboo "seems to be her attempt to redress the power balance that weighs so heavily" on the man's side.[253] All the tales considered below suggest that this attempt is ultimately successful; all end with the earthly man's *esluinement* into spatiotemporal alterity.

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[251] Wade, *Fairies,* 115.
[252] Wade, 127-128.
[253] Leavy, *Swan Maiden,* 105.

Byrne is one of several commentators to note that this "removal to the otherworld is figured in terms very reminiscent of death."[254] She elaborates:

> Achieving personal immortality, freedom from moral constraint, superabundant beauty, atemporality, and perfect joy requires a break with what is finite and mutable, a break most evident in death. The crossing of a significant physical boundary into a realm that does not appear to be subject to the rules and vicissitudes of the actual world could hardly fail to evoke the notion of the afterlife.[255]

The morbid ambiguity of *esluinement* was not lost on medieval commentators, as the above passage from Wace suggests. Green suggests that "[f]or all that the traditional position seems to have been that those taken by the fairies lived on in a deathless paradise, the notion (no doubt ultimately plausible to both laity and clerics alike) that fairyland was really a land of the dead came gradually to undermine it."[256] Yet the near-ubiquitous associations between parahumans and prehistoric tombs, calamities (such as illness[257] or drowning[258]), and pastness suggest less a "gradual undermining" than a complex web of belief in which religious orthodoxy, folk tradition, and literary invention could all shade interpretations. Leavy proposes that:

> Rather than differentiating fairyland from the world of the dead, or attempting to reconcile them, it might be more useful to focus on their common denominator, which is their *contrast to the actual world*. Both the dead and humans captured by the fairies are imagined to exist beyond the pains of human life. Those half in love with easeful death may find themselves drawn to the pleasures of an imagined world beyond this one, at the same time guiltily reacting to worldly commitments by expressing this guilt with images of an inferno.[259]

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[254] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 47. Compare, for example, Poirion's observation that Marie "associe étroitement la féerie et l'idée de la mort…" (Poirion, "Mort," 194).
[255] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 58.
[256] Green, *Elf Queens,* 170.
[257] For instance, in the widely distributed *Elveskud* family of North European ballads.
[258] For instance, the "drowning demons" familiar from a number of folklore traditions—nixes, kappas, Peg Powlers, etc.
[259] Leavy, *Swan Maiden,* 247.

In *Lanval, Graelent,* and *Guingamor*, however, there is no hellish imagery; only (particularly in the two anonymous works) a melancholy realization of what it means to absent oneself from worldly attachments, up to and including mortality. By commenting differently on the stakes of *esluinement* through parahuman desire, each offers a distinct take on the relationship between time and alterity.

Given their core similarities and intriguing differences, the interrelation of the three *lais* discussed here has been an important question for scholars. R. N. Illingworth published what has become the consensus view in 1975: "that Marie's *lais* (and more particularly her *L[anval]*) were composed before either *GR[aelent]* or *G[ui]N[gamor]*."[260] And while "it seems almost impossible to prove conclusively from verbal parallels alone whether [*Guingamor*] was composed before or after" *Graelent*,[261] the episode at the spring in the former seems to have been taken from the latter.[262] Illingworth's theory, for all its attention to detail, depends on viewing inconsistency as a narrative flaw. Moments such as Graelent's rape of the otherworldly woman, or the "double inductions" of both Graelent and Guingamor (who pursue an unusual animal into a supernatural realm, and *then* stumble across a supernatural woman bathing in a spring) are seen as failings that betray the composers' imperfect dependence on earlier, more artistically unified versions of their tales.[263] Without necessarily proposing an alternate chronology, it is important to recognize that this notion of narrative decay elides the old, the authentic, the traditional, and the uncomplicated in ways that, I hope, this dissertation as a whole has problematized.

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[260] R. N. Illingworth, "The Composition of "Grælent" and "Guingamor," *Medium Ævum* 44, no. 1/2 (1975): 31.
[261] Illingworth, "Composition," 38.
[262] Illingwoth, "Composition," 41.
[263] Wade rightly criticizes this approach, characterizing such "contradictory fictional facts as part of the construction of a strategically designed incomplete internal folklore existing within an autonomous text-world" rather than "as "as authorial failings—as degenerations of ur-myths, or ur-fairies, through which it is revealed that these authors did not understand the mythic complexities of the ancient materials they were dealing with, and therefore confused these borrowed elements as they attempted to conform them with the conventions of romance" (Wade, *Fairies*, 147-148).

Commenting on the knight's departure into otherworld space, Andrzej Dziedzic writes that "Les héros quittent la fixité et l'uniformité du quotidien pour entrer dans le mouvement et le renouvellement."[264] Indeed, I would add, they distance themselves from the very concept of the quotidian, of dailiness, and of journeys, which are, etymologically, no more than the distance a traveler can cover in a day. In the *esluinements* of Lanval, Graelent, and Guingamor, otherworld alterity discloses its predication on both time and space. These distances are accessible according to different dimensional rules. A seemingly short span of time or short voyage can convey the traveler immeasurably far into other eras and geographies; so far, in fact, that he loses the affiliations and mortality that define his humanity, and becomes something else.

Depictions of passage in and out of otherworlds work to destabilize notions of both historical and individual time. In *Lanval,* the knight's choice of otherworldly sensuality over the martial and political conflicts of Arthur's court resonates as an ethical opting-out from history. *Graelent* problematizes desire for the parahuman, revealing the gendered cost of the freedom it appears to offer. Lastly, *Guingamor* stages its hero's entry, departure, and final disappearance into the otherworld as a process through which the individual hero become wildly unsynchronized from communal-historical notions of time. The dislocations that these otherworld travelers experience suggest both a deep suspicion over the possibility of reconciling present and past, and a lingering question over what it could mean to escape into alternate histories and subjectivities.

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[264] Dziedzic, "Espace Surnaturel," 392.

4. Saved by Strangeness in *Lanval*

A young foreigner finds his prospects for advancement at court dry up. Despondent, he wanders into the wilderness, where he comes upon a beautiful woman in an opulent tent. She tells him that she has long loved him from afar, and will both be his lover and shower him with riches so long as he does not tell anyone about their affair. He consents, and finds his life transformed by the woman's wealth and affections. But he draws the attention of the queen, who propositions him. When he turns her down, she accuses him of having a sexual preference for men; he replies that in fact he already has a mistress so superlative that her merest servant surpasses the queen in every way. Greatly offended, the queen tells the king that the young man has attempted to seduce her, and insulted her when she turned him down. The king declares that he will punish the knight, who, distraught that he has lost his lover by breaking his promise to her, submits to royal judgment. A convocation of noblemen declares that if he is able to prove the truth of his boast—to demonstrate his mistress's superiority over the queen—he will be acquitted; otherwise, he will be banished. On the appointed day, the court is just about to come to session when a series of beautiful women begin arriving, announcing the coming of their lady. At last she appears in splendid array, declares her lover's innocence, and whisks him away on her horse into a mysterious land from which he never returns.

Lanval enjoyed perhaps "the most enthusiastic reception" of any of Marie's "Breton" tales[265]—in addition to its numerous manuscript copies and clear influence on later works, it inspired a translation into Old Norse (*Januals ljóð*) as well as a plethora of medieval English adaptations (including *Sir Landevale*, *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Lambewell*, and *Sir Lamwell*). This

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[265] Jane Chance, *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 44.

popularity has extended to modern scholarship; a jstor.org search for "Lanval," for instance, returns 774 hits, far more than those for any of the other poems considered in this chapter.[266] The only one of Marie's poems set at Arthur's court, and the second-oldest surviving Arthurian story in French (after the *Roman de Brut*), *Lanval* both capitalizes on the success of Geoffrey and Wace and moves beyond their warlike pseudo-chronicles into the psychologically complex, erotic romances that would come to define the *matière de Bretagne.* In her unapologetic depiction of a sovereign, sexual woman, who chooses her lover, punishes his transgression of their trust, and ultimately whisks him away to her unknowable realm, Marie seems to take a stand against the sexist tropes that often undermine depictions of powerful women, in her age as in ours. Yet in making this woman not entirely human, a force acting outside and against history rather than within it, Marie complicates an interpretation of her poem in straightforward terms of female empowerment—and this even without considering the character of Arthur's queen, whose accusations against Lanval when he rejects her advances make for uncomfortable reading in the modern era. By setting her tale in a newly fashionable historical epoch and imbuing her female lead with parahuman characteristics, the poet orients it towards a consideration of the fantastically expanded possibility of the past and the foreclosures of that possibility through *esluinement*.

Borders of Encounter

When the poem begins, Arthur is at "Kardoel," (Carlisle, in Cumbria) "*Pur les Escoz e pur les Pis, / Ki destrueient le païs; / En la tere de Logre entroent / E mut suvent la*

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[266] The other numbers gleaned from this admittedly sub-scientific survey are: *Guigemar*, 483; *Yonec*, 327; *Graelent*, 278; *Guingamor*, 259; and *Tydorel*, 126.

damagoent"[267] ("because of the Scots and because of the Picts, / who were destroying the countryside; / they would invade the land of Logres / and very often devastate it.") This area is still referred to as "the Borders," reflecting the fact that since the Roman construction of Hadrian's Wall (c. 128 CE) and the Antonine Wall (c. 154 CE), if not longer, this narrow neck of Britain has divided northern from southern polities. As such, it has hosted many of the major conflicts between these regions, and its indigenous population have long been stereotyped as a rambunctious people of suspect loyalties.[268] Marie's *Escoz* and *Pis* participate in this trope of dangerous borderland barbarians. But while "Scots" were part of the sociopolitical landscape in Marie's day, "Picts" were not, and had not been for nearly three centuries.[269] Marie's invocation of this archaic nation, and the dangers they pose, situates her tale in a different historical reality from that of her audience. It reminds them that although many of the trappings of the society she depicts resembles her contemporary world, the two are not fully congruent. Indeed, Marie's use of "Logre" for Arthur's kingdom—rather than, say, "Britain"—is another archaicizing move. The word was readily available for her and other romancers in the pages of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, but in the twelfth century it did not refer to any extant territorial unit (at least outside of Wales, where *Lloegyr* did, and continues to, designate "England.") Again, it is important to emphasize that these references likely did not carry the once-upon-a-time flightiness later associated with the Arthurian era. They were grounded in works that, while now universally recognized as fantastical, occupied a much more contested position with regards to historical

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[267] Marie de France, *Lanval*, in *Lais de Marie de France*, ed. and trans. Alexandre Micha (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 144 (lines 7-10).

[268] One of the more famous explorations (and endorsements) of this myth, focusing on the 16th and 17th centuries but beginning with the construction of the Roman walls, is George MacDonald Fraser, *The Steel Bonnets* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

[269] There is, unfortunately, nothing to suggest that David MacRitchie's outlandish theory on the Picts as the origin of British fairy legends might have suggested itself to medieval audiences (David MacRitchie, *Fians, Fairies, and Picts* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd, 1893).

accuracy in the context of their twelfth-century composition. While many contemporaries decried the blatant implausibility of the Galfridian Arthur, others—including royal dynasties—embraced him as a forebear and precursor of their expansive and chivalric domains.

Marie depicts Arthurian governance as based upon the monarch's accumulation and redistribution of sources of sovereignty. When the king holds court, "*A ceus de la Table Roünde / … / Femmes e teres departi, / Fors a un sul ki l'ot servi: / Ceo fu Lanval; ne l'en sovint*"[270] ("To those of the Round Table, / … / he distributed women and lands, / except to just one of those who served him; / this was Lanval; he forgot about him.") This blithe description of women being doled out as property epitomizes Marie's Round Table, at which even an exceptionally handsome and capable knight such as Lanval is an outcast merely due to his foreign origin. Though a king's son, "*Mes luin ert de sun heritage! / … / Hum estrange descunseillez, / Mut est dolenz en autre tere, / Quant il ne seit u sucurs quere!*"[271] ("Yet he was far from his hereditary lands! / … / A foreign man, without council / is very sorrowful in some other country / when he does not know where to seek aid!") Like the protagonists of the poems discussed in the first part of this chapter, Lanval is estranged from his surroundings, lacking advice in how to navigate them. Frederick Hodgson has described him as "a detailed portrait of alienation," and furthermore as one whose alienation primes him to seek out the supernatural: for him, "The Otherworld will become an alternative to the injustice of Arthur's court."[272]

Unguided, Lanval is able to wander out of hegemonic patterns and into new modes of being: "*Fors de la vilë est eissuz, / Tut sul est en un pré venuz*"[273] ("he went out from the city, / all alone came into a meadow.") This emergence from confined into open space, like Yonec's

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[270] Marie, *Lanval,* 144 (lines 15 and 17-19).
[271] Marie, *Lanval*, 146 (lines 28 and 36-38).
[272] Hodgson, "Alienation," 20-21.
[273] Marie, *Lanval*, 146 (lines 43-44).

mother's exiting the *hoge*, suggests a more expansive horizon of possibility. It also contrasts the restrictive civilization of the court with the unbounded freedom of the borderland wilderness. Yet there is also a danger here, one the knight's horse perhaps senses before he does: *Mes sis cheval tremble forment; / Il le descengle, si s'en vait, / En mi le pré vuiltrer le lait*[274] ("But his horse trembled forcefully; / he uncinched its saddle, and it wandered off; / he let it roll in the midst of the field.")

Much has been made of Lanval's temporary abandonment of his horse here, given the close relationship in terms of image and status between *chevalier* and *cheval*. When he goes to visit the lady's pavilion, the text will note, "*De sun cheval ne tient nul plait*"[275] ("He took no account of his horse.") Certainly when paired with the poem's final image, of Lanval swept up to ride behind his mistress on her horse, these lines suggest a deviation from normative masculine chivalric identity. But there is also a discourse of release from stricture and obligation here; the horse is left to roll and play on its own, just as Lanval frees himself from the oppressive atmosphere of the court and its panoptic obsession with the affairs of others. Dismounted, he is able to encounter his lady on a literally more even footing, without sacrificing his nobility—the unnamed woman describes him as "*pruz e curteis*," "noble and courtly," when declaring her love for him. Rather than being negated, these positive adjectives have been abstracted into a new and idealized setting, the aristocratic court crystallized to the encounter in a lavish but ephemeral structure between two lovers (and a few gracious attendants, though these are generally referred to in the same terms as their mistress—*meschine*, *dameisele*—in a pointed rejected of the hierarchy implied by the word *reïne*).

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[274] Marie, *Lanval,* 146 (lines 46-48).
[275] Marie, *Lanval*, 148 (line 78).

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Lying beside a stream, Lanval offers himself to this encounter passively. The wish-spells or obsessive hunts that so often propel medieval characters into meetings with the uncanny and parahuman allow inchoate desire to take an active and teleological shape. But Marie suggests here that any quest remains implicated in the customs and practices of the Arthurian court, an end-oriented obsession that leads—Wace makes clear—to apocalyptic destruction. Lanval does not act; he only looks:

> *Garda aval lez la riviere,*
> *Si vit venir deus dameiseles:*
> *Unkes n'en ot veü plus beles!*
> *Vestues furent richement,*
> *Laciees mut estreitement*
> *En deus bliauz de purpre bis;*
> *Mult par aveient bel le vis!*[276]

> (He looked down the river, / and saw two young women coming: / he had never seen any more beautiful! / They were dressed richly, / laced very tightly / into two dark purple tunics; / they had truly beautiful faces!)

Could there be a hint of the *Avalun* to come in Lanval's glance down along (*aval lez*) the river? A stretch, perhaps, but not necessarily more of one than the observation of multiple critics that *Avalun* and *Lanval* are (sort of) anagrams.[277] If this preposition does indeed prefigure the knight's ultimate destination, it inspires reflection as to what Avalun may be figured as being towards, or away from. Lanval's impressions of this realm occur at a remove, mediated via its parahuman natives, all young, beautiful women in expensive and sexualized clothes. His lover herself exemplifies these qualities:

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[276] Marie, *Lanval,* 146 (lines 54-60).

[277] E.g., McLoone, "Bedfellows," 8; and Chance, *Subversions,* 53, for whom this lexical relationship acts as "a signifier for the restoration or final attainment of the protagonist's identity, if the lay narrativizes his quest from nonbeing to existence, or, conversely, from ironic "existence" to nonbeing."

Ele jut sur un lit mut bel–
Li drap valeient un chastel–
En sa chemise senglement.
Mut ot le cors bien fait e gent!
Un cher mantel de blanc hermine,
Covert de purpre alexandrine,
Ot pur le chaut sur li geté;
Tut ot descovert le costé
Le vis, le col e la peitrine.[278]

(She lay on a very lovely bed— / the sheets were worth a castle— / wearing nothing but her shift. / Her body was so well-made and elegant! / An expensive shawl of white ermine / covered in Alexandrian scarlet / she'd thrown over herself, to keep warm; / her sides were completely bare, / her face, her neck, and her chest…)

The frankly erotic gaze here, coupled with our knowledge of the poet's gender, lends itself to queer readings of *Lanval* specifically and Marie's oeuvre more broadly. Given the survival biases of medieval textiles and art, it is hard to say just how scandalous or unusual the revealing outfit described here would have appeared to a late twelfth-century audience. Older narratives of a nude-phobic Middle Ages that needed the rediscovery of antique sculpture to again celebrate the human body—overwhelmingly male in this context, anyway—are only beginning to be challenged in an art-historical context;[279] the relationship between depicted nudity and social practice (to say nothing of literary imagination) remains understudied. In the context of *Lanval*, it may be observed that many of Avalun's customs seem to operate at the interplay of concealment (the hidden nature of the island itself, the prohibition against revealing the affair) and openness (the exposed bodies of the women, the opulent display of wealth, the frank confession of love and desire).

Taken together, these mores produce both a frisson of desire and a lurking trepidation, foreshadowed by the knight's trembling horse and continuing to punctuate his encounter with the

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[278] Marie, *Lanval*, 148-150 (lines 97-105).
[279] E.g., Sherry C. M. Lindquist, ed., *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

woman. When her servants come to bring him to her pavilion, they promise, "*Sauvement vus i cundurums*"[280] ("We will take you there in safety.") Why would Lanval need to be assured that he would be safely conveyed to the pavilion, lying only a short distance away? And what would he, a warrior, gain from the protection of two maidens? Perhaps we are meant to imagine Picts lurking in ambush, even if the poem seems to have lost interest almost immediately in the Scottish border, in favor of another, more fundamental one. But to wander near or cross this border, parahuman narratives continuously insist, is no less dangerous than to traverse the boundaries of political cartography. Returning from his liaison, Lanval evinces a profound psychological discomfort, despite all the delights he has experienced:

> *Mut est Lanval en grant esfrei.*
> *De s'aventure vait pensaunt*
> *E en sun curage dotaunt;*
> *Esbaïz est, ne seit que creire,*
> *Il ne la quide mie a veire.*[281]
>
> (Lanval is terribly frightened. / He goes off, preoccupied by what has happened to him / and uncertain in his soul; / he is overwhelmed, he does not know what to believe, / he could not believe it to be true at all.)

The fundamental cause of the knight's terror is a loss of ontological stability. His experience ("*s'aventure*") has overthrown his essential ability to distinguish the truth ("*veire*") from falsehood or fiction. The sensual pleasures offered by his mistress, rather than satisfying him, undermine his faith in the nature of reality. This break, moreover, has taken place within his own world. His lover is clear that she has journeyed out of her realm in order to meet him—"*Pur vus vinc jeo fors de ma tere: / De luinz vus sui venue quere!*"[282] ("For you, I have come out from

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[280] Marie, *Lanval,* 148 (line 75).
[281] Marie, *Lanval,* 154 (lines 196-200).
[282] Marie, *Lanval*, 150 (lines 111-112).

my lands: / from far away, I have come seeking you!") This distance, the text suggests, operates

differently from our notions of extension through space; the woman seems to cross it quickly and

easily whenever she has an assignation with Lanval. Breaking into the young knight's world, she

has suggested its permeability and its contingency. Her personal beauty implies the splendor that

lies beyond it, as does her tent:

> *La reïne Semiramis,*
> *Quant ele ot unkes plus aveir*
> *E plus pussaunce e plus saveir*
> *Ne l'emperere Octovïan,*
> *N'esligasent le destre pan.*[283]
>
> (Queen Semiramis, / when she had more wealth than ever, / and more power and more
> wisdom, / any more than the Emperor Octavian / couldn't have bought so much as the
> right-hand side.)

The pavilion's splendor far exceeds the legendary acquisitional power of this world's

ancient monarchs. While the invocation of the Neo-Assyrian warrior queen Semiramis

(*Shammuramat*) suggests female sovereignty, this allusion is to some extent counterbalanced by

Octavian, famed, among other feats, as the destroyer of Cleopatra's kingdom. But the entire

point of the simile is the incommensurate nature of these rulers' power with that of the

parahuman woman. She does not belong to the same historical sequence, the *translatio imperii*

that was widely depicted by medieval Europeans as moving from east to west through time.

Seeking her equivalent, the poem delves back into history, but even this metaphor-driven

archaeology fails. The tent, with "its boundedness and opulence, …suggests a space within the

real world where the rules of the otherworld might be expected to operate."[284] These rules have a

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[283] Marie, *Lanval,* 148 (lines 82-86).
[284] Byrne, "Fairy Lovers," 103; and *Otherworlds*, 32.

specific and deleterious relation to earthly chronology; they deconstruct it, and the realities it implies. The woman's declaration of her love, moreover, explicitly offers to bring Lanval outside the political economies of his world: "*Emperere ne quens ne reis / N'ot unkes tant joie ne bien, / Kar jo vus aim sur tute rien*"[285] ("Neither emperor nor count nor king / ever had such joy and bounty, / for I love you above all else.") In contrast to the Arthurian realm, in which "women and land" are tokens in a redistributive racket, the parahuman holds out a promise of hierarchy overthrown by desire.

Choosing Alterity

Lanval immediately and unconditionally accepts the lady's erotic offer, declaring he will fulfill her wishes:

> *Turt a folie u a saveir.*
> *Jeo ferai voz comandemenz;*
> *Pur vus guerpirai tutes genz.*
> *Jamés ne quier de vus partir,*
> *Ceo est la rien que plus desir!*[286]
>
> (…whether it be for madness or for wisdom. / I will follow your commandments; / for you, I will abandon all other people. / I will never try to leave you; / This is all I shall ever desire!)

For Jane Chance, this promise represents "a serious renunciation of society, civilization, and his own family."[287] Certainly, he seems to sever his allegiance to the Arthurian court, which has never given him anything, in favor of a new sovereign who bestows upon him everything. Yet he does not ask to go to her country, and she does not offer. In light of what comes after, this

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[285] Marie, *Lanval*, 150 (lines 114-116).
[286] Marie, *Lanval,* 150 (lines 126-130).
[287] Chance, *Subversions,* 49.

seems puzzling. Why is disappearing to the realm so splendidly microcosmed in the woman's tent not immediately part of their arrangement, but rather the dramatic climax of their falling-out? It is as if both initially believe in not only the possibility but the preferability of a split existence between states of being. Their attraction is rooted in the distances (ontological, spatial, temporal) across which the woman extends her love. Aware as she is of these, her power consists in large part of bypassing them; she offers Lanval a supernaturally responsive and ubiquitous intimacy:

> *Quant vus vodrez od mei parler,*
> *Ja ne savrez cel liu penser*
> *U nuls puïst aver s'amie*
> *Sanz repreoce e sanz vileinie,*
> *Que jeo ne vus seie en present*
> *A fere tut vostre talent;*
> *Nul hum fors vus ne me verra*
> *Ne ma parole nen orra.*[288]

> (Whenever you wish to speak with me, / you could never think of a place / where one could have his lover / without reproach and without crudeness, / where I wouldn't be with you in a moment / to accomplish your desire; / no man but you will see me, / nor hear my words.)

This short speech combines a plethora of superhuman powers—telepathic communication, teleportation, selective invisibility and inaudibility—all of which suggest the interfacing of the lady's realm with Lanval's. If the tent implies that otherworld space can be enclosed out of quotidian reality, this speech goes further, suggesting that it can manifest in the affective relation between two people. Yet it remains a delicate state, poised on a respect and secrecy that will prove impossible for the earthly partner to maintain. Only with his failure, which exemplifies the incompatibility between otherworldly love affairs and the duties of an

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[288] Marie, *Lanval,* 152 (lines 163-170).

earthly court, does the lady—after a suspenseful interval that seems purely calculated to exact psychological punishment upon Lanval—commit them both to parahuman existence.

The queen's attempted seduction of Lanval occurs as a sordid reprise of his otherworldly liaison. The powerful woman notices Lanval from afar. She identifies both his beauty and his isolation—"*Lanval s'en mit a une part / Luin des autres…*" "Lanval had set himself apart, / far from the others." He has done so, in fact, specifically in order to "…*tenir / Baiser, acoler e sentir*"[289] ("hold, / kiss, embrace, and feel") his lover. The queen presents herself to the knight and, like her supernatural counterpart, begins her attempt at seduction with his name ("*Lanval, mut vus ai honuré*," "Lanval, I have esteemed you greatly").[290] When he rejects her, she misattributes this to his homosexuality: "*Asez le m'ad hum dit sovent / Que des femmes n'avez talent! / Vallez aves bien afeitiez, / Ensemble od eus vus deduiez*"[291] ("Actually, people have often told me / that you have no interest in women! / You have dapper young servants, / you take your pleasure with them.") While the text strongly implies that this is a baseless accusation, the queen is right to see Lanval as removed from normative reproductive economies. He does indeed have no interest in "women," at least in the plural; he surrounds himself with pleasure and luxury; and the being he is interested in, as he protests, is a different entity entirely from the queen:

> *Mes jo aim e si sui amis*
> *Cele ki deit aver le pris*
> *Sur tutes celes que jeo sai.*
> *E une chose vus dirai,*
> *Bien le sachez a descovert:*
> *Une de celes ki la sert,*
> *Tute la plus povre meschine,*
> *Vaut mieuz de vus, dame reïne,*

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[289] Marie, *Lanval*, 156 (lines 253-256).
[290] Marie, *Lanval,* 158 (line 263).
[291] Marie, *Lanval,* 158 (line 279-282).

De cors, de vis e de beauté,
D'enseignement e de bunté![292]

(But I love, and am indeed the lover / of one who must take the prize / over all others whom I know. / And I'll tell you one thing, / know this well and openly: / just one of those who serve her, / even the poorest handmaiden, / is worth more than you, Madame Queen, / in body, in face, and in beauty, / in learning and in goodness!)

Lanval's references to his lover in this, his promise-breaking revelation, remain purposefully vague. She is referred to only with one demonstrative pronoun (*cele*) and one object pronoun (*la*), the former then echoed twice in the plural with two different referents (all the other women Lanval knows, and his lover's servants), as if to dissipate and obscure the original sense. This seems to reflect Lanval's attempt to keep his promise, even as he acknowledges that he is disclosing something previously secret (making it *descovert*). But this verbal slipperiness also indicates the degree to which his parahuman paramour remains ineffable, nameless, somehow beyond speech. Note particularly how the queen, repeating and warping Lanval's words to inspire Arthur to punish him, replaces these pronouns with nouns:

De tel amie se vanta
Ki tant iert cuinte e noble e fiere
Que mieuz valeit sa chamberiere,
La plus povre ki la serveit,
Que la reïne ne feseit.[293]

(He boasts of such a lover / who is so clever and noble and proud / that her chambermaid / the poorest one who serves her, / is worth more than the queen.)

The mechanism by which these seemingly subjective judgments become the basis of legal proceedings against Lanval is obscure, perhaps purposefully so. Arthur is determined to punish the foreign knight for a comparative insult, one that implies (like the earlier allusions to

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[292] Marie, *Lanval*, 158-160 (lines 293-302).
[293] Marie, *Lanval,* 160 (lines 320-324).

Semiramis and Octavian) the existence of a world that exceeds human metrics. Yet it is also a world the king does not understand and so cannot account for. Arthur convenes a sentencing council "*C'um ne li puisse a mal retraire*"[294] ("so that no man could speak ill of him"). It will ultimately be a woman who reveals and undoes the king's injustice, allowing the line to suggest how Lanval's lover's power circumvents the legal customs of the patriarchal court.

Her dramatic entry just as the trial is about to begin provides an opportunity for Marie to engage in an extraordinary description, twenty-five lines long, encompassing the woman's beauty, her rich yet revealing dress, and the graceful animals—palfrey, sparrowhawk, and greyhound—that act as her living accoutrements.[295] Proceeded by her handmaidens (among whom, the narrator is sure to note, "*N'i ad cele mieuz ne vausist / Que unkes la reïne ne fist,*"[296] "There wasn't one who wasn't worth more / than the queen ever was"), the lady offers an open demonstration of the splendor formerly reserved for Lanval's eyes alone. Previously invisible, she now insists on being extraordinarily visible, impossible *not* to see.

> *La pucele entra el palais:*
> *Unkes si bele n'i vint mais!*
> *Devant le rei est descendue,*
> *Si que de tuz iert bien veüe.*
> *Sun mantel ad laissié cheir,*
> *Que mieuz la peüssent veer.*[297]

> (The young woman entered the palace; / such a beauty had never come there! / She dismounted before the king, / so that she could be well-seen by all. / She let her cloak fall to the ground / so that they could see her better.)

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[294] Marie, *Lanval,* 164 (line 384).
[295] Marie, *Lanval*, 172-174 (lines 548-573).
[296] Marie, *Lanval*, 172 (lines 531-532).
[297] Marie, *Lanval,* 174 (lines 601-606).

Elizabeth S. Leet emphasizes how this pageantry effects a re-gendering of social order: "The fairy mistress acts as a knight in this scene: her bold arrival expresses both her wealth and autonomy, just as it displays an aesthetic ideal and troubles any supposition that power resides in a human, male, singular body. Instead, agency is fairy, female, and plural. Marie's throng of fairies defy the patriarchal court and exploit the covetous male gaze."[298] Leet does not elaborate on what she means that agency has become "fairy," or rather what the stakes of that label specifically are here. Does the parahuman allow feminine sovereignty in ways that the merely human would not? Does it operate as *deae ex machina*, a plot mechanism to rescue the hero from royal vindictiveness as no earthly power could? Or is its valence primarily observable in the ways it transforms Lanval, who is, Jane Chance writes, progressively "disfeudalized, dispossessed, unknighted, unclassed, unmanned, disgendered, feminized, and then silenced into complete alterity and nonbeing before his transportation—his *translation*—to the Other World"[299]? The parahuman is perhaps the only force able to effect this metamorphosis, even if Chance likely goes too far in proposing that "…the unchivalric and effete alien Lanval wins this prize because of his ideal feminized qualities, both physical and spiritual, chiefly his beauty, loyalty, and gentleness: truly Other in masculine terms."[300] Lanval's chivalry is never described as anything less than exemplary; his masculine beauty is attractive not only to the parahuman world but to the queen, who epitomizes strict court heteronormativity. The notion that Avalun represents a "prize," however, is considerably more complex. Marie concentrates the final lines of her poem on a very particular image:

> *Fors de la sale aveient mis*
> *Un grant perrun de marbre bis,*

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[298] Leet, "Objectification," 78.
[299] Chance, *Subversions,* 47.
[300] Chance, *Subversions,* 53.

U li pesant humme muntoent,
Ki de la curt le rei aloent.
Lanval esteit munté desus.
Quant la pucele ist fors a l'us,
Sur le palefrei, detriers li,
De plain eslais Lanval sailli!
Od li s'en vait en Avalun,
Ceo nus recuntent li Bretun,
En un isle ki mut est beaus.
La fu ravi li dameiseaus!
Nul hum n'en oï plus parler
Ne jeo n'en sai avant cunter.[301]

(Outside the hall, they had placed / a great block of dark marble, / where the armored men would mount / who went out from the king's court. / Lanval was mounted upon it. / When the young woman came out through the gate, / upon the palfrey, up behind her, / Lanval leaped in a single bound! / With her he went into Avalun, / as the Britons tell us, / into an island that is truly beautiful. / There the young man was carried off! / No man heard tell more of him, / nor do I know any sequel to tell.)

Practically, the marble block permits Lanval's impressive leap onto his rescuer's mount. But the resonance is important: this is an aid set in place for men weighed down by armor, as they leave the king's court to fight his battles. These violent associations are also apparent in the word *ravi*, past participle of *ravir*: to plunder, steal, abduct, rape. The combination of the passive form (*fu ravi*) with Lanval's proactive vault creates something of a paradox; he has willingly hurtled himself into a denial of his own agency, made himself a spoil of his lover's raid on Arthur's court.

It is also significant that only here does Marie name the parahuman world. The exact origins of the place name *Avalon* and its variants are difficult to trace, beside a general agreement that it derives ultimately from a Celtic root meaning "apple" (Common Celtic *abal-, Welsh *afal*, Breton *aval*). There are towns called Avalon and Avallon in eastern France, though

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[301] Marie, *Lanval*, 176 (lines 633-646).

(with the exception of Geoffrey Ashe's positivist-euhemerist accounts of a historical Arthur[302]), these are generally thought to be unrelated to the legend. Like so much of the *matière de Bretagne*, the site is first mentioned in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, where it appears as *Insula Avallonis*, the "Isle of Avalon."[303] By the end of the twelfth century, it had become widely known in romance. The identification of Avalon with Glastonbury is first attested in the account of the 1190 exhumation of Arthur undertaken by the monks of Glastonbury Abbey. These claimed to discover, alongside the royal bones, a cross inscribed "*Hic jacet sepultus inclitus rex Arturius in insula Avalonia*" ("Here lies buried the famed King Arthur in the isle Avalonia.") But Marie does not seem to envision her lovers absconding to Somerset. Her *Avalun* is an otherworld familiar to her audience principally (perhaps solely) as the site of Arthur's occultation following the tragic destruction of his kingdom at Camlan (Wace's *Camble*), a conflict set in motion by his queen's illicit liaison with his nephew Modred.

Jane Chance asserts that Avalon in *Lanval* represents "a feminized culture of magical power, true nobility, and transcendent love" that exists in contrast to Arthur's antifeminist court, "in which women, bought and distributed as wives, must seek sexual satisfaction in secrecy through adultery and political and social manipulation of subordinates."[304] While this is true enough with regards to the otherworld's engagement with Logres, it cannot entirely obscure the island's sepulchral resonances. Carrying Lanval off to her realm, his parahuman mistress prefigures the journey that Arthur himself is fated to make, his *esluinement*, like Lanval's, instigated by his queen's infidelity. To see the Arthurian court in this poem as representing merely the mundane facts of patriarchal governance is to ignore the tragedy that loomed large

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[302] Geoffrey Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1985), 95-96.
[303] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *De Gestis Britonum* [*Historia Regum Britanniae*], ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 199
[304] Chance, *Subversions,* 54.

over the mythos, particularly before Chrétien's romances, and especially in conjunction with a depiction of the queen's treacherous licentiousness and the mention of the king's ultimate destination. In this reading, Lanval leaps out of history before it is too late—before he dies, like every single other knight, in Arthur's futile continental wars of conquest or the fratricidal slaughter of Camlan. He chooses to make himself a victim of parahuman power, which in turn steals him out from the inexorably teleological march of chronology and into a deeper—indeed, an unnarratable—uncertainty. The same Arthurian world that allows Marie to imagine the interpenetration of a parahuman reality necessitates the occultation of her hero, if his affair is to end happily. Only perhaps in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, likewise an attempt to reimagine the catastrophe of Arthur's downfall, is the conflict between human time and the supernatural equally pronounced.

5. Offended Alterity in *Graelent*

A successful young knight attracts the attention of his queen, who solicits his love. He tells her that he has no interest in committing to the complexities of love, even if he were not her husband's vassal. Scorned, she turns the king against him, and he sinks into abject poverty. Out hunting on a borrowed saddle, he comes across a white hind. This he chases to a moor where he finds a woman bathing in a spring. He steals her clothing, but returns it when she upbraids him, and promises not to harm her. Then he asks for her love, but, offended, she rejects him. He rapes her, then immediately begs her not to be angry with him and promises he will always be faithful to her. She accepts, on the condition that he tell no one about their relationship. Returning to his lodging, the knight finds that she has gifted him extensive riches, a loyal servant, and a beautiful

horse. Furthermore, the woman is able to visit him invisibly, and, happy and wealthy, he regains his former success. But the following Pentecost, his king demands that all guests affirm that there is no woman more beautiful than the queen. The knight refuses, and, threatened with punishment, claims that his lover is more beautiful. As the king prepares legal proceedings, the young man finds his servant gone and his wealth vanished. Before the trial begins, however, a procession of maidens ride into the court, preceding his former lover. She declares that it is impossible to declare one woman more beautiful than any other, asks that the knight be acquitted, and leaves. He races after her, plunging into a raging river that she has crossed. When the woman's servants implore her not to let him drown, she drags him across into her land. His horse remains behind, neighing for its lost master.

Graelent is an anonymous poem, though like many similar works it has at various times been ascribed to Marie de France.[305] The hero's epithet, *Muer*, "the Great" (modern Breton *meur*), connects him with the pseudohistorical Gradlon Meur, a monarch primarily associated with the sunken city of Ys. When this epithet occurs in the last lines of the poem, it has been misread by some as referring to the knight's death (French *mort*; modern Breton *morv*).[306] While the primary meaning is certainly the positive epithet, the word's resonances in French are worth considering—though Old French speakers would generally have pronounced the final consonant, rendering it an imperfect homophone.

The poem seems to have enjoyed at least some international distribution; there is a reference to the titular character performing it in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*.[307] Perhaps more than any of the other works explored in this chapter, it is a troubling text, particularly for modern

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[305] Burgess and Brook, *Lays*, 352.
[306] E.g., Byrne, "Fairy Lovers," 106.
[307] *Nu Tristan der begunde / einen leich dâ lâzen klingen în / von der vil stolzen friundîn / Grâlandes des schœnen* (Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan*, ed. Karl Marold (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1977), 55.)

audiences. It reprises many of the more unsavory aspects of *Lanval,* and the fact that the hero

seems to change the woman's disdain for him into love by raping her makes him especially

abhorrent. But there are moments that challenge a straightforwardly misogynistic reading of the

text. The woman appears at court not to rescue the lover who has betrayed her, but to reject

androcentric beauty standards and then attempt to abandon him for good, relenting only when he

is on the verge of drowning. Indeed, it is at least possible to posit that the woman achieves an

effective revenge for the wrongs Graelent commits against her—nearly, if not quite, as elaborate

as that meted out to the imprisoning husband of *Yonec*. Throughout, the poem comments

pessimistically on the ideal aspects of supernatural romance presented in other works,

particularly *Lanval*, questioning whether the parahuman truly offers an escape from the gendered

oppressions of this world.

Limits of the Imaginative

Graelent's self-reflexive interest in its own genre surfaces early, in the knight's awkward

encounter with his queen. Unlike the parallel scene in *Lanval*, Graelent is willfully clueless to the

queen's advances, even as she is much more physically forward: "*Entre ses braz prent Graalant,*

/ Et l'acola estroitement" ("She took Graelent in her arms, / and embraced him tightly.") She

then asks him if he has a lover, "*Car molt devroit bien estre amez*"[308] ("for truly you should be

loved.") But rather than replying directly, he launches into a long speech on the nature of love,

beginning and ending with the declaration that, given the demands that love places upon both

parties involved, "*'Dame', fet il, 'ce ne veil pas; / Amor tenir n'est mie gas… / Por ce ne m'en os*

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[308] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, eds., *Graelent*, in *French Arthurian Literature, Volume IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 378 (lines 67-68 and 82).

entremetre"[309] ("'Lady,' he said, 'I do not want it; / to have love is no joke… / For this, I don't dare to get involved with it.'") While Yonec's mother is inspired by her familiarity with romantic literature to instigate an extraordinary magical act, Graelent declares himself paralyzed. The exalted discourse of love intimidates, even repels him. As Laurence Harf-Lancner writes, "Graelent ne veut pas aimer par peur de ne pouvoir réaliser un idéal trop élevé."[310] Yet when later he encounters a beautiful and vulnerable woman far from civilization, he feels no hesitation in declaring his immediate attraction and then, when she rebuffs him, forcing himself upon her. In light of this, his high-minded abstractions ("*Amor n'est preuz sanz compaingnon. / Bone amor n'est se de .II. non, / De cors en cors, de cuer en cuer*,"[311] "Love is not noble without a companion. / There's no true love if it's not between two, / from body to body, from heart to heart") ring hollow, even cynical. The struggle to connect physical desire with genuine respect proves too much not only for Graelent but also for his king and, judging by the parahuman woman's scornful declaration at his trial, his entire cultural world. While the boorish Graelent is perhaps particularly ill-suited for the encounter into which he stumbles, the text refuses to imagine any less maladroit masculinity.

As noted in the Introduction to this section, scholars such as R. N. Illingworth have seen the knight's pursuit of a white animal which leads him to the bathing woman as a compositional flaw, resulting from the incomplete seaming of two separate narratives of otherworldly encounter. While *Guingamor* at least makes an effort to connect the animal and the parahuman, *Graelent* does not. The white hind possesses an alluring mystique that never coheres, as it does in *Guigemar*, into magic or even a clear plot function. One hint of narrative importance—the

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[309] *Graelent*, 380-382 (lines 83-84 and 116).
[310] Harf-Lancner, *Fées,* 244.
[311] *Graelent*, 380 (lines 99-101).

animal "*l'amainne*"[312] ("lead him") to the heath where the woman is bathing—is cancelled out as soon as he sees her: "*De la biche n'ot il plus cure*"[313] ("he had no more interest in the hind.") Instead, the animal seems to be a false sign, a simulacrum of significance that beguiles Graelent as much as it does the audience. It primes both for a supernatural adventure that never happens, and the sordid encounter that occurs in its place undermines any notion of "destiny" that the motif of the questing beast might suggest.

Considering this, it is noteworthy that the bathing woman herself exhibits few supernatural characteristics compared to the other parahumans discussed in this chapter. Only three times does she exhibit any powers that break realistic convention. The first of these—she knows Graelent's name, though they have seemingly never met—lends itself amply to mundane explanations, even if (as mentioned in the introduction to this section) it situates her in a different relationship to time and memory. The second instance, her claim of prophecy, is far more general and less actionable than parallel assertions in other texts: "*Por vos ving ça a la fontaingne, / Je souferré por vos grant painne, / Bien savoie ceste aventure*"[314] ("For you I came here to the spring. / I will suffer great pain for you; / truly I knew this would happen.") Seemingly at drastic odds with her earlier behavior, this declaration suggests a retroactive bid for agency over the crime committed against her. Only the third ability is somewhat more explicitly magical: as the knight hosts a lavish party at his lodgings, using the lady's gifts to entertain all those in the town who are needy, she herself is invisibly present: "*S'amie voit lez lui aler, / Assez si puet rire et joer. / La nuit la sent dejoste lui; / Comment porroit avoir anui?*"[315] ("He sees his friend come beside him / and he can laugh and have plenty of fun. / At night he feels her beside him; / How

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[312] *Graelent*, 384 (line 217).
[313] *Graelent*, 386 (line 228).
[314] *Graelent*, 390 (lines 329-331).
[315] *Graelent*, 394 (lines 413-416).

could he be sorrowful?") This recalls the ubiquitous intimacy of Lanval's lover, but the entirely passive sensations that Graelent has of this woman possess an almost ghostly quality, as if the combination of his desire and his guilt have generated a phantom in her form. While other parahuman motifs surface throughout the poem—particularly, the great wealth that she grants to Graelent—these seem intentionally leached of their magic. In *Lanval*, the knight returns to his lodging from his liaison and "*Ses humme treve bien vestuz*"[316] ("finds his men well-dressed"), suggesting the reach of his lover's bestowing powers across space and time. In *Graelent*, by contrast, these gifts are conveyed by a valet leading a finely-decked horse. Likewise, when Lanval breaks his disclosure taboo, it is in a private conversation, making his lady's instantaneous disappearance in response only explicable supernaturally. Graelent, in typically blundering fashion, breaks his vow in an announcement before the entire court; when he returns to find the valet gone, there is no need to invoke magical agency. His horse, likewise one of the woman's gifts, remains in his possession up until the final dramatic scene at the riverbank.

In light of these details, many of which seem like explicit refashionings of motifs from other poems, it is worth questioning Burgess's and Brook's assertion in their summary of the tale that the lady "is clearly a *fée*."[317] As this chapter has attempted to argue, none of the beings in these poems can really be called "clearly a *fée*," a word and category the texts reject almost unanimously. But the woman in *Graelent* is particularly unlike the canonical conception of such beings, as developed in later medieval romances and modern literary criticism. Graelent himself, in turn, is not immune to parahuman resonances. After handing back the woman's clothes at the spring, "*Par la main senestre la prent, / Et puis l'a de soi aprouchiee; / D'amor l'a requise et*

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[316] Marie, *Lanval,* 154 (line 202).
[317] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, *"*Introduction [to *Graelent*],*"* in *French Arthurian Literature, Volume IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 353.

proie[e], / Et que de lui face son dru"[318] ("He took her by the left hand, / and then drew her

towards him; / he asked and begged for her love, / and that she make him her beloved.") Both his

specific gesture and coercive entreaty recall the lake-knight from *Tydorel*, though the woman

here refuses to acquiesce:

> "*Graalant, tu quiers grant outrage;*
> *Je ne te tieng mie por sage.*
> *Durement me doi merveillier,*
> *Quant de ce m'oses aresnier.*
> *Ne soiés mie si hardiz,*
> *Toste n seroies malbailliz;*
> *Il n'avient pas a ton parage*
> *D'amer fame de mon lignage.*"[319]

> ("Graelent, your request is very offensive; / I don't consider you wise at all. / I
> really have to marvel / that you dare solicit me in this way. / Don't be so brazen, / or you
> will soon find yourself in dire straits; / it doesn't become your rank / to love a woman of
> my lineage.")

In her overwhelming disdain, it is easy to lose track of the questions that her rejection

leaves unanswered. What is the *lignage* to which she refers, that so outranks his? The poem's

introduction has specified that Graelent is of impeccably noble birth, even if his lands are few;

indeed, "*N'i ot si riche dame el païs, / Se il la requeïst d'amer, / Ne l'en deüst miex escouter*"[320]

("there was not so wealthy a woman in the land, / who if he requested her love, / would not have

had to listen well.") Finding himself so roundly rejected by this woman, who lacks a name or any

other proof of her exalted ancestry, Graelent turns violent. The sexual assault occurs in

immediate response to this perceived slight upon his status. But hereafter, the poem never

clarifies why the woman perceives her nobility to far outrank the knight's. An uncharitable

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[318] *Graelent*, 388 (lines 276-279).
[319] *Graelent*, 388 (lines 281-288).
[320] *Graelent*, 376 (lines 12-14).

reading might suggest that the text sides with Graelent's assessment that she is "*si fiere*," "too proud," especially given the terms in which it narrates her eventual acceptance of his love, after the assault:

> *La damoisele ot et entent*
> *La proiere de Graalent,*
> *Et voit qu'il est cortois et sages,*
> *...*
> *Et se il se depart de li,*
> *Jamés n'avra si bon ami.*[321]

(The young woman heard and listened / to Graelent's request, / and saw that he was courtly and wise, / … / and that if he left her, / she would never have such a good lover.)

If she was simply wrong earlier—if Graelent truly is wise, noble, and a perfect match for her—then there really is nothing more to read into her initial taking of offense. This scene merely rehearses the queen's failed seduction of Graelent, with the replacement of the man's refusal by the woman's now leading to violence rather than ostracism. The poem lends itself readily to this interpretation, and both medieval and modern audiences would be justified in attributing an essential misogyny to it.

Yet the hints of the woman's parahuman associations, however attenuated in comparison to related poems, highlight the stakes of her claim to difference. After all, she never claims to be *more* noble than him, only other; she offers no hierarchy of relation between his *parage* and her *lignage*. Considered this way, she seems savvy to the complications and tragedies that attend love affairs between worlds. Her eventual acquiescence, after all, leads not any mutual bliss, but to the knight's public embarrassment, imprisonment, and very nearly his death. As he considers the fallout from his renewed violation of the woman's trust, the narrator comments, "*Or est*

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[321] *Graelent*, 388 (lines 305-307 and 309-310).

Graalant entrepris; / Miex vosist estre morz que vis"[322] ("Now Graelent has been trapped; / he

would rather be dead than alive.") His psychological anguish doesn't necessarily generate much

sympathy, at least for a modern reader; his "entrapment" is entirely his own fault, and that of his

equally chauvinist monarch. But it is also a result of his consenting to a condition that, in every

case where it is imposed, proves impossible to keep. If the imposition of the taboo is indeed, as

Barbara Fass Leavy argues, the parahuman woman's attempt "to redress the power balance"

between herself and her male captor/lover,[323] it lends itself equally to a revenge that targets the

wrongdoer's self-worth and personal autonomy. When Graelent's day comes in court, he submits

himself to the king: "'*Sire', fet il, 'el n'i est mie, / Je ne la puis noient avoir; / Fetes de moi

vostre voloir*"[324] ("'Lord,' he said, 'she isn't here at all, / I cannot have anything from her; / do

with me as you will.") While the phrasing is not identical, this certainly recalls the knight's

"taking his pleasure" ("*A fet de li ce qu'il li plest*"[325]) on the woman during their first

encounter—a denial of agency.

Rejection and Rescue

  While the scene of the woman's arrival at court closely mirrors *Lanval*—the successive

arrival of two pairs of beautiful handmaidens, all said to surpass the queen's beauty, before the

climactic entry of the woman herself, richly dressed on horseback (her mantle costs the same as

Lanval's lady's sheets—".I. chastel")—the result is markedly different. She does not confirm her

superiority in a male-administered beauty contest, but rejects the entire premise: "*N'est nule de si*

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[322] *Graelent*, 398 (lines 532-533).
[323] Leavy, *Swan Maiden,* 105.
[324] *Graelent*, 400 (lines 554-556).
[325] *Graelent*, 388 (line 296).

grant biauté(z), / Qu'autre si bele ne resoit"[326] ("There is none of such great beauty, / that some other could not be as beautiful.") She denies outright the possibility of assimilating the particular to the universal. And far from whisking her former lover away on her horse, she is determined to ignore him: "*Tot jors li vet merci criant, / Mes ne li respond tant ne quant*"[327] ("All day he kept following her, crying for forgiveness, / but she did not reply to him at all.")

Even in this final scene, Graelent ignores her wishes, barreling into the river she has crossed as she warns him he will drown. When she first rescues him, she drags him back to his bank, telling him, "*...N'i pouez passer, / Ja tant ne vos savroiz pener*"[328] ("You cannot cross here, / however much you think to try.") The text does not characterize the far side of the river in explicitly magical terms, as *Guingamor* will do in a parallel scene. It instead invites an understanding of the parahuman territory, here, as a realm of gendered anger that demands near-fatal contrition before it will grant the offender freedom from both personal and cultural history. When the woman's handmaidens prevail upon her to again save the knight from himself, she at last brings him across to her side:

> *Quant d'autre part sont arivé,*
> *Ses dras moilliez li a osté;*
> *De son mantel afublé l'a,*
> *En sa terre o lui l'en mena.*
> *Encor dient cil du païs*
> *Que Graalant i est toz vis*[329]

> (When they arrived on the other side, / she took off his sodden clothes; / she wrapped him in her cloak. Into her land she brought him with her. / The people of this land still say / that Graelent remains alive there.)

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[326] *Graelent*, 404 (lines 650-651).
[327] *Graelent*, 404-406 (lines 675-676).
[328] *Graelent*, 406 (lines 695-696).
[329] *Graelent*, 408 (lines 729-734).

The assertion of sovereignty implicit to "*sa terre*," "her land," makes clear the terms on which Graelent's immortality depends. In the end, none of the markers of his status—his wealth, his horse, even his clothes—make it across this border into the parahuman realm. Literally stripped down to the bare minimum of his being, the knight is not, like Lanval, rescued from the events of history but from the hierarchical systems that contour it; not from fratricidal bloodshed but from the material and social trappings of knighthood. If Graelent's violation of another's autonomy was the ultimate cause of any suffering he endured, then his loss of aristocratic privilege becomes a kind of rescuing.

The poem does not end here, but rather offers an extended and mournful account of the horse that the knight has left behind. This animal roams the woods, evading capture and disdaining human contact, while crying out piteously; "*Grant duel mena por son seignor*"[330] ("it displayed great sorrow for its lord.") While the mortal man has been carried over into a new relation with time, the otherworldly animal has become trapped in the relentless succession of normative chronology:

> "*Lonc tens aprés lui l'oï l'on*
> *Par maint an en cele saison*
> *Que ses sires de lui parti,*
> *La voiz, la friente et le cri*
> *Que li bons chevaus demenot*
> *Por son seignor que perdu ot.*"[331]
>
> ("For a long while after, one could hear, / for many years in the same season / that its lord had abandoned it, / the voice, the tumult and the cries / that the good horse carried on / for its lord which it had lost.")

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[330] *Graelent*, 408 (line 737).
[331] *Graelent*, 408 (lines 745-750).

The animal's distress—"*La merveille du bon destrier,*"[332] "the marvel of the good

destrier"—is said to directly inspire the composition of the *lai* from which the poem *Graelent*

derives. The plaintive sounds of a creature severed from its affective ties, from its home, and

from the unbounded time of which it is a native, prove eminently narratable. James Wade writes

that the horse becomes:

> a remnant in the natural landscape that serves as an intra-world reminder of the knight's
> adventure and his subsequent departure with his mistress… a reminder that points
> simultaneously to his nonpresence in the human world and to his supernaturally extended
> life, a reminder that works to make Graelent… a remnant of the past in his own
> story…[333]

The horse's inconsolable anguish, an embrace of wildness which is also a freedom from the

strictures of domesticity, suggests a nonhuman (/parahuman?) parallel to the seer Myrddin Wyllt,

a precursor to Geoffrey of Monmouth's Merlin, who lived in prophetic sylvan madness along the

Scottish border after losing his lord in battle. Vaticinatory poems ascribed to Merlin, such as the

Armes Prydein discussed in the Introduction to Chapter I, became central not only to Welsh

fictions of weirded chronology but also to Geoffrey of Monmouth's appropriation and

popularization of Brittonic legendary history. Nowhere is this lineage of parahuman time,

together with the loss and freedom it occasions, clearer than in *Guingamor*, with which this

chapter closes.

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[332] *Graelent*, 408 (line 751).
[333] Wade, *Fairies,* 143.

6. Losing Time in *Guingamor*

A young man resists the sexual advances of his royal aunt. But he then takes up a hunting challenge that she offers the court: a mysterious white boar has been linked to the disappearance of ten other knights. The young man overcomes the objections of his uncle the king, and sets out after the creature. His hunt takes him into the wilderness, where he comes across an empty palace of green marble. Shortly thereafter, he encounters a beautiful woman bathing in a spring and steals her clothes. Addressing him by name, she demands these back, and he sheepishly complies. She then offers to help him catch the boar if he stays three days at her court. He consents, and goes with her. En route, the young man asks for her love, and she grants it to him. They return to the green palace that the knight had visited earlier, but now it is full of music, feasting, and guests, including the ten missing boar hunters. However, as the knight prepares to depart three days later, his host informs him that he has in fact been gone for three hundred years. Refusing to believe her, he insists on trying to return home, bringing the boar's head as a trophy. The lady lets him go, with a warning not to eat or drink anything from his own country. Passing back across the river, he soon encounters a charcoal-burner, and asks for news of his uncle the king. The charcoal-burner reveals that three hundred years have indeed passed since the king has died. Filled with sorrow, the knight tells his story and gives the charcoal-burner the boar's head as proof of his adventure. He then eats an apple and immediately becomes weak and old. Two maidens appear and spirit him back across the river; the charcoal-burner presents the boar's head and the story to the current king, and the tale becomes widely famed.

Guingamor is preserved in only a single manuscript, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, nouv. acq. fr. 1104. When Gaston Paris published it in 1879, he declared it to be another

of Marie's creations, but this attribution has now been abandoned.[334] It seems to have drawn on a Breton legend that existed in several versions;[335] in some manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes's *Érec et Énide*, "Guingamars" is briefly mentioned as the *amis* of Morgant la Fee, and lord of Avalon.[336] While similarly implying a tale of a knight occulted into an otherworld as the lover of a powerful being, the details of Chrétien's version suggest an incorporation into the Arthurian milieu, a project that the poet of the extant *Guingamor* did not undertake.

In a 1968 monograph, Sara Sturm critiqued the tendency of scholarship on the *Guingamor* to concentrate either on the *lai*'s relationship to the oeuvre of Marie de France or on a cataloguing of its tropes. Fixating on these, she argued, tended to create a picture of "ineptitude on the part of the anonymous poet," whose artistry was clearly related to but divergent from Marie's, and whose use of motifs deviated from the structures expected by those made normative by Marie's more famous creations. Staking a claim in favor of the poem's artistic merit, Sturm proposed that "it is not the deviations from traditional patterns which require explanation, but rather the traditional elements which must be explained in terms of their contribution to this basic conception, the *sens* of the poem." While Sturm's characterization of the poem as "a hero-

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[334] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, *"*Introduction [to *Guingamor*]," in *French Arthurian Literature, Volume IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 144.

[335] There are also intriguing international parallels—the Japanese tale of Urashima Tarō, for instance, has striking similarities. This story, the earliest allusions to which date from the eighth century, concerns a fisherman who rescues a turtle from maltreatment. As a reward, he is brought to the undersea palace of the dragon god Ryūjin, whose beautiful daughter, it transpires, is the same turtle that he saved. The fisherman stays with her for three days, then asks to return home. She gives him a small casket, warning him not to open it. When he returns to land, he finds that nothing and no one is familiar. He asks if anyone remembers anyone of his name, and is told that three hundred years ago, someone of that name was lost at sea. In shock, he opens the box, suddenly ages, and dies (Hayao Kawai, *Dreams, Myths and Fairy Tales in Japan* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon, 1995), 107-112).

[336] Chrétien de Troyes, *Érec et Énide*, ed. Jean-Marie Fritz (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1992), 166. Fritz's edition gives "Guilemers" for this character's name in the text, providing "Guingamars" as a footnoted variant. This section of the text is a catalogue of Arthur's vassals who come to celebrate Pentecost at his court, and some of it seems based on other written sources, e.g., the mention of "Maheloas" as "*Li sires de l'Ile de Voirre*," "The lord of the Glass Isle," which corresponds to Caradoc of Llancarfan's account of "Melvas," lord of "*Glastonia, id est Urbs Vitrea*," in the *Vita Gildae* (Caradoc of Llancarfan, *Vita Gildae*, in *Chronica Minora: Saec. IV. V. VI. VII.*, ed. Theodor Mommsen (Berlin: Weidmann, 1898), 109.)

quest in terms of Christian morality" is quite different from my own interpretations, her rejection

of approaches that take the poem's inferiority as a given is crucial to any serious discussion of

Guingamor.[337]

     Where the other texts analyzed in this chapter allude to the connections between

parahumanity and an altered relationship to time, *Guingamor* makes this link explicit. Indeed, the

only openly supernatural characteristic of the woman that the knight meets in the woods is her

existence outside of human chronology, and her ability to carry others with her into this blithe

immortality. By setting this encounter in an ancient past, the anonymous poet suggests ways in

which fantastic narrative can negotiate between the alterity of long-gone ages and the uncanny

survivals of other times into and beyond our own. In this dramatic, melancholy account of

esluinement, the parahuman comes to stand for both the agent and the object of distancing,

No Time for Love

     The poem's introduction situates it both temporally and in terms of authenticity. "*D'un

lay vos dirai l'aventure; / Nel tenez pas a troveüre. / Veritez est ce que dirai / … / En Bretaingne

ot .I. roi jadis*"[338] ("I will tell you the story behind a *lai*; / don't take it for some fiction. / This is

the truth that I will tell you. / … / In Brittany there was a king long ago…") Both these devices—

the truth claim of a transparently fantastic story, and the setting in a far-off past—are common in

medieval narrative, and one or both are used in the prologues of many of the poems considered

here. But *Guingamor* is unique in the ways it redeploys both of these tropes in its conclusion.

The *jadis* of the initial setting is complicated by the three-century jump forward of its

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[337] Sturm, *Guingamor,* 9-10.

[338] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, eds. *Guingamor*, in *French Arthurian Literature, Volume IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 162 (lines 1-3 and 5).

denouement. The exact relationship of this latter era to the assumed context of the poem's narrational present is not clear. But there is some degree of elision between the two periods, which both represent a subsequent age in which the events earlier related have fully metamorphized into stories. In the interval between Guingamor's disappearance and his reemergence, he has become transformed into a figure of legend. And after the charcoal-burner relates his encounter with this ancient being at the court, "*En fist li rois .I. lai trover*"[339] ("the king had a *lai* composed about it.") This seems to directly contradict the initial account that the tale is not *troveüre*, not a composition or poetic invention. But there is a play here on the more literal sense of *trover*, "to find." The story, after all, is not really about the prince's disappearance in ancient times (which did not, after all, result in any *lai*) but about his re-emergence into a later era. "Finding" here stands for an encounter between two sundered chronologies, each locating in the other the solution to a mystery that had been left hanging within their respective times.

Another of *Guingamor*'s significant departures from poems explored above is its lack of sex. Its erotics are instead furtive and deferred. As with many of his counterparts, Guingamor's disinterest in heterosexual romance may carry a homoerotic connotation: early in the poem, "*Por deduire el chastel ala. / Le seneschal (l)a encontré / Ses bras li a au col gité*"[340] ("To enjoy himself, he went to the castle. / He encountered the seneschal, / threw his arms around his neck.") But like Guigemar, his initial orientation tends towards the asexual. When the queen attempts to seduce him, he offers not Graelent's blustering philosophy but an almost endearing cluelessness. She drops clear hints of her affections that also unintentionally foreshadow his destiny: "*Guingamor, molt estes vaillans / … / Riche aventure vos atent / Amer pouez molt*

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[339] *Guingamor*, 192 (line 676).
[340] *Guingamor*, 162 (lines 32-34).

hautement. / Amie avez, cortoise et bele…"[341] ("Guingamor, you are truly valiant / … / A

splendid adventure awaits you; / you could love to the highest degree. / You have a lover, courtly

and beautiful…"). Guingamor, however, not only denies the possibility of loving one he has

never seen, he declares himself uninterested in romance altogether: "*Ne quier ouan d'amor

ovrer*"[342] ("I do not seek now to engage in love.") Some comedy ensues over the platonic versus

the erotic connotations of *amer*, with the young knight steadfastly refusing to understand it in the

latter sense until the queen spells it out for him in no uncertain terms:

> '*… je vos aim de bon coraje*
> *Et amerai tout mon aage*,'
> …
> '*Bien sai, dame, qu'amer vos doi*
> *Fame estes mon seignor le roi*'
> …
> '*Je ne die mie amer ainsi*
> *Amer vos voil de druerie*
> *Et que je soie vostre amie…*'
> …
> *Guingamor entent qu'ele di[s]t*
> *Et quele amor ele requist*[343]
>
> ('I love you with all my heart, / and will love you all my days.' / … / 'Well I know, lady,
> that I should love you! / You are the wife of my lord the king.' / … / 'I'm not talking
> about that kind of love. / I want to love you romantically, / and for me to be your lover.' /
> … / Guingamor now understands what she's saying / and what kind of love she's asked
> for.)

In his awkward response to this admittedly awkward situation, Guingamor betrays a

discomfort with erotic intimacy that seems to propel him into the hopeless boar hunt, and persists

into his circumspect relationship with the woman he meets by the spring. He steals her clothes

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[341] *Guingamor*, 164 (lines 71 and 73-75).
[342] *Guingamor*, 164 (line 86).
[343] *Guingamor*, 166 (lines 91-92, 95-96, 100-103, and 107-108).

as she bathes in an ill-advised scheme to get her to speak with him. But she immediately

demands that he return them while inviting him to her lodgings, and he complies without

hesitation. Whereas most of the other encounters in this chapter begin with a straightforward

declaration of love, Guingamor only raises the prospect as they ride back to her castle:

> *Doucement la regarde et prie*
> *Que s'amor li doint et otroit;*
> *Onques mes n'ot le cuer destroit*
> *Por nule fame qu'il veïst,*
> *Ne d'amor garde ne se prist.*
> *Cele fu sage et bien aprise,*
> *Guingamor respont en tel guise*
> *Qu'ele l'amera volontiers,*
> *Dont ot joie li chevaliers.*
> *Puis que l'amor fu ostroiee,*
> *Acolee l'a et besiee.*[344]

(He looked at her sweetly and begged / that she would give and grant him her love; /
never had his heart been troubled / by any woman he had seen, / nor had he spared any
thought for love. / This one was wise and well-raised; / she answered Guingamor thus, /
that she would love him happily, / and this made the knight overjoyed. / Since this love
was granted, / he embraced her and kissed her.)

This is the extent of their consummation. Here and throughout the remainder of the poem,

the couple never even seem to be alone together. There is something endearingly chaste about

their relationship, compared to the variously fraught and anguished affairs of the poems

discussed above. Yet this lack of conflict also makes the life-shattering consequences that their

dalliance has for Guingamor all the more shocking.

Instead of the progress of a love affair, the narrative engine of *Guingamor* is the hero's

hunt for the white boar. This sends the knight into the forest, providing an escape from his

entanglement with the queen; it structures his interactions with the woman, compels his tragic

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[344] *Guingamor*, 182-184 (lines 492-502).

attempt at return, and ultimately, provides material proof of his encounter with the woodsman. All the more vexing, then, that this chase too is missing its climax: the boar is dealt with offstage, its head presented pre-packaged to Guingamor when he requests it. This creature's nominal centrality to the poem creates considerable interpretive difficulty. Against critics who asserted that the tenuous connection between the boar and the supernatural woman represents the poet's failure to properly understand the relevant folkloric or legendary material, Sarah Sturm asserts that "the author has been very careful to show that his hero enters the forest for very specific, this-world reasons."[345] While, again, Sturm's specific conclusions are quite different from my own (within her Christian allegorical reading, she situates the boar as "a symbol of licentiousness"[346]), her observations on the text's refusal to provide certain seemingly crucial links are important for establishing the distinctive features of its poesis.

Without ascribing the boar a direct allegorical meaning, it can still be asserted that it represents a quintessential quest-object, one which promises renown to whoever can achieve it and leads the hero into an unfamiliar and danger-fraught territory. All of these stereotypical aspects are emphasized in the king's comments when his queen asks for a volunteer to accomplish the hunt:

> *Onques nus hon n'i pot aler*
> *Qui puis em peüst reperier*
> *Por qoi le porc peüst chacier*
> *La lande i est aventureuse*
> *Et la riviere perilleuse*
> *Molt grant dommage i ai eü*
> *.X. chevaliers i ai perdu*
> *Toz les meillors de ceste terre*
> *Qui le senglier alerent querre.*[347]

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[345] Sturm, *Guingamor,* 29.
[346] Sturm, *Guingamor,* 98.
[347] *Guingamor*, 168-170 (lines 174-182).

(No man has ever been able to go there / in order to be able to hunt the pig / and then been able to return.[348] / The ground there is unpredictable / and the river perilous. / I have suffered very great misfortune from it: / I have lost ten knights there, / all the best of this country, / who went to seek the boar.)

Hunting this animal is dangerous, the king suggests, not on account of its tusks or savagery, but because of the area where it dwells. This land is *aventureuse*—a place of unpredictable occurrences, an uncanny zone that has swallowed up the king's best knights. Its ineffable alterity creates an effect of distance. As the quarry runs from its pursuer through this landscape, the poet's vocabulary takes an unusual turn: "*Li senglers s'en va esloingnant*"[349] ("The boar went off, distancing.") The text doesn't seem to place any particular weight on the word; certainly its metaphysics aren't highlighted, as they are in Wace's account of Arthur's *esluinement*. And yet in its flight, the boar leads Guingamor far from home in both time and space. During the hunt, it is always one step ahead of him; later, it will be his only remnant in the future world to which he returns. The adventure that the knight experiences in this *aventureuse* country stutters similarly, races breakneck ahead of him, lingers after his final vanishing.

The river, as the king notes, is also threatening, though the reason why is only revealed at the poem's end—it functions as a temporal boundary, provoking immediate aging in those who have experienced the suspended time of its far shore and then partake in any food grown on the mortal side. To the extent that this river demarcates time, like the rivers of Paradise in the Hereford Mappamundi, it does so not in the usual sense of a geologically slow and steadily erosive current, but rather as an abrupt and destructive flood.

While ignorant of these specific effects, Guingamor remains cognizant of his uncle's warnings; as he rides in pursuit of the boar, the narration echoes the king's words precisely:

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[348] This and the previous line have been switched in the translation.
[349] *Guingamor*, 174 (line 313).

"*Guingamor point a grant eslés / Par mi la lande aventureuse / Et la riviere perilleuse*"[350]

("Guingamor spurred at great speed / through the unpredictable ground / and the perilous river.")

Yet he undertakes the risk, reasoning "*Que s'il puet prendre le sengler / Et sainz ariere retorner / Parlé en ert mes a toz dis / Et molt en acuidra grant pris*"[351] ("that if he can get the boar / and come back safe / it would be spoken about forever / and he would gain great rewards from it.")

This line acquires a bitter irony in light of the poem's conclusion. Guingamor yearns to become the subject of narrative and so escape his contingent (and otherwise heirless) existence. But the immortal fame he desires, in fact, has nothing to do with his safety, and the consequences of his adventure are far too complex to refer to as a reward. As the hunt continues and he loses his uncle's prized hunting dog, he seems to sense, however inchoately, the negative turn of the stakes: "*Se n'ai mon chien et au porc fail / Ja mes joie ne bien n'avrai / N'en mon païs ne tornerai*"[352] ("If I don't have my dog, and fail at the pig, / then I will never have joy or good things / nor will I return to my land.")

Given this investment, his connection to the woman he meets in the woods is based to some extent in her claim to a special power over the boar:

> *Amis, tuit cil qui sont el mont*
> *Nu porroient hui mes trover*
> *Tant ne s'en savroient pener*
> *Se de moi n'aviez aïe.*
> *Lessiez ester vostre folie*
> *Venez o moi par tel covent*
> *Et je vos promet loiaument*
> *Que le sengler pris vos rendrai*
> *Et le brachet vois baillerai*
> *A porter en vostre païs*
> *Jusqu'a tierz jor je vos plevis.*[353]

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[350] *Guingamor*, 176 (lines 356-358).
[351] *Guingamor*, 176 (lines 347-350).
[352] *Guingamor*, 180 (lines 406-408).
[353] *Guingamor*, 182 (lines 464-474).

(Friend, all those who are in the world / could never find it, / no matter how much they would try, / if they did not have my aid. / Leave your madness be; / come with me on this condition, / and I promise you loyally / that I will give the boar to you, captured, / and return to you the hound / to bring back to your land / upon the third day from now; I promise you.)

Guingamor takes in stride this revelation that his hunt, up until now, has been a mad and hopeless endeavor. He does not question what the woman means when she says that the boar can only be caught through her help—he seems oblivious to the eerie resonances of her promise. Instead, he remains fixated on returning home with his quarry and gaining renown, a transcendence of time that far eclipses the three days he thinks he will have to wait.

Besides the woman, the only thing that competes with the boar for the knight's attention is the empty palace. Burgess and Brook admit that this site represents a mystery. Is it part of the supernatural woman's plan to entrap Guingamor? Or "merely a narrative device to enhance the aura of mystery and indicate the presence of the supernatural before the actual meeting with its owner"?[354] Guingamor himself is bewildered by his interest in it: "*'Par foi', fet il, 'je sui traïz; / Bien me puis tenir a bricon. / Por esgarder une meson / Cuit avoir perdu mon travail'*"[355] ("'By faith,' he said, 'I am betrayed; / I can truly consider myself an idiot. / For looking at some house, / I believe I have wasted my efforts.'") But the house in question is intriguing enough on its own that, exploring its empty alcoves, the young knight "*se reheta / Que tele aventure a trovee / Por raconter en sa contree*"[356] ("rejoiced / that he had encountered such an adventure / to recount in his homeland.") As much for its rich decoration of gold and heavenly gems as for its eerie emptiness, the building is worthy of the same narrativization that Guingamor seeks for himself.

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[354] Burgess and Brook, "Introduction [to *Guingamor*], 152.
[355] *Guingamor*, 178 (lines 402-405)
[356] *Guingamor*, 178 (lines 394-396).

Like Muldumarec's city, the combination of adornment and void in this woodland castle make it seem both imminent (a new site awaiting occupation) and abandoned, a ruin waiting for the forest to reclaim it. Both are true—the palace is, like Gwales in *Branwen*, a space opening onto all eras yet existing outside of them, where the trauma of existence in time is put on hold. When Guingamor visits it alone, he experiences it as a mesmerizing but hollow curiosity, a foreshadowing of his native cities which, as he sojourns in the woods, fade into ruin. But accompanying his parahuman lover, he sees it animated into a defiantly atemporal life, one that has abandoned all teleological aspirations. Thus "*Les .X. chevaliers… / Qui perdu erent de sa terre / Qui le sengler alerent querre*"[357] ("the ten knights… / who had been lost from his land, / who had gone seeking the boar") are more than glad to welcome the young man to their exiled company. Their presence suggests the ephemeral nature of the quest Guingamor has staked so much on when compared to the unbroken eternity in which they now dwell. But seeing them does not seem to disturb him, overwhelmed as he is by the festivities and stubbornly attached to a notion of time he has already lost forever.

Becoming Narrative

As Guingamor enjoys the castle's delights, the poem dwells on his unstated expectations:

> *N'i cuida que .II. jors ester,*
> *Et au tierz s'en cuida raler;*
> *Son chien et son porc volt avoir,*
> *Et son oncle fere savoir*
> *L'aventure qu'il ot veüe,*
> *Puis reperera a sa drue.*
> *Autrement li fu trestorné,*
> *Car .III.C. anz i ot esté,*
> *Mors fu li rois et sa mesnie,*
> *Et toz iceus de sa lingnie,*

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[357] *Guingamor*, 184 (lines 520-522).

Et les citez qu'il ot veües
Furent destruites et cheües.[358]

(He thought he would stay there only two days, / then on the third, he thought to go back; / he wished to take his dog and his pig / and let his uncle know / about the adventure he had experienced, / then he would return again to his beloved. / But it turned out otherwise for him, / for it had been three hundred years. / The king was dead, and his retinue, / and all those of his lineage / and the cities he had known / were destroyed and fallen.)

This is the first of three times that Guingamor's three lost centuries are mentioned in the poem. Here, the narrative voice comments on the actual length of time that the knight spends partying among the parahumans he does not yet know he has become. It poignantly juxtaposes his naïve plans with the ravages of time that have rendered them unrealizable, relating as they do to people and places that no longer exist. Eleven lines later, his otherworldly *amie* informs him of the truth when he asks to leave with the dog and boar:

'*Amis,' fet ele, 'vos l'avrez,*
Mes por noient vos en irez.
.III.C. anz a si sont passé(z)
Que vos avez ici esté(z);
Mors est vostre oncles et sa gent,
N'i avez ami ne parent.
Une chose vos di ge bien:
N'i a homme si ancien
Que vos en sache riens conter,
Tant n'en savriez demander.'[359]

('Friend,' she said, 'you will have them, / but you will leave here for nothing. / Three hundred years have passed / while you have been here; / your uncle and all his people are dead, / you have no friend nor relative there. / I will tell you one thing truly: / there is no man there so old / who will know anything to tell you about them, / however much you ask about them.')

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[358] *Guingamor*, 184-186 (lines 533-544).
[359] *Guingamor*, 186 (lines 549-558).

As it transpires, she is not quite correct on this last point. But her emphasis on Guingamor's loss of relationships makes clear his transition to a new mode of being, one for which the mortal world contains *noient*, nothing worthwhile. There is no possibility of return, she suggests, because he has lost the coherence of existing within a single span of time, with all the social relations and cultural attachments that adhere to a historical subject. The world that now exists is one in which he no longer possesses meaning.

He refuses to believe her ("'*Dame,' fet il, 'ne puis pas croire / Que ceste parole soit voire,*'"[360] "'Lady,' he said, 'I cannot believe / that these words are true'"") but promises to return to her quickly if she is correct. She warns him against eating on the far side of the river; if he does, "*Tost en seriez engingniez*"[361] ("You will quickly be entrapped by it.") This is the same word Marie used to describe the spikes that the imprisoning husband laid for Muldumarec in *Yonec*; they imply a scheme, a device to snare an animal or conquer a city. But in this case, the trap is simply mortal sustenance. The three hundred years of worldly history that Guingamor has missed lie latent in all grown things, and become poisonous once he ingests them. Time, in this conception, is a record impressed into living entities—humans, boars, apples—which bear not only the growth marks of their individual lifespans but all that has come before them. But it is also a trap, a fatal contrivance from which the woman and her court have opted out.

These valences are again emphasized as Guingamor rides out through the forest: "*Le jor erra jusqu'a midi / De la forest onques n'issi / Tant la vit laide et haut creüe(e) / Que toute l'a desconneüe*"[362] ("He wandered that day until noon; / he never came out of the forest. / He saw it so ugly and overgrown / that he did not recognize it at all.") The tangled woodlands embody the

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[360] *Guingamor*, 186 (lines 559-560).
[361] *Guingamor*, 186 (line 570).
[362] *Guingamor*, 186-188 (lines 583-586).

uncontrolled onrush of time that has continued in Guingamor's absence; this present has not so much degenerated as it has grown out of control, overwhelming his antiquated sense of orientation with a horrific complexity. In its midst, he comes upon the charcoal-burner; a woodsman, we might imagine, very like the *vilain* whom Wace depicted as the despoilers of Brocéliande. Asked if he knows anything of Guingamor's royal uncle, this peasant provides the third, conclusive statement on the centuries that the hero has missed:

> '*Par foi sire n'en sai noient.*
> *Icil rois dont vos demandez*
> *Plus a de .III.C. anz passez*
> *Que il morut mien escient*
> *Et tuit si homme et sa gent*
> *Et les corz que avez nomees*
> *Sont grant tens a totes gastees.*
> *Tex i a de la vielle gent*
> *Qui racontent assez sovent*
> *De ce roi et de son neveu*
> *Que il avoit merveilles preu*
> *Dedenz ceste forez chaça*
> *Mes onques puis ne retorna.*'[363]

> ('By faith, sir, I know nothing about this. / This king that you ask about? / More than three hundred years have passed / since he died, as far as I know, / and all his people and his folk, / and the courts that you named / have for a long time been completely in ruins. / Still, there are a few old folks / who tell stories fairly often / about that king and about his nephew. / How marvelously brave he was! / Into this forest he went hunting, / but never after returned.')

The charcoal burner mentions three processes that have occurred across these centuries. He emphasizes the extinction not only of the old king's line but of all those associated with him; not explicitly suggesting conquest (as in the cognate story of Herla, discussed in Chapter I) but making clear the complete discontinuity of identity that ensues across such an expanse of time. His image of the ruined court both offers a stark contrast with the festive atmosphere of the

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[363] *Guingamor*, 188 (lines 596-608).

otherworldly green palace and recalls Guingamor's first sight of it, mysteriously empty. But it is the third development that is perhaps most interesting. Though king and court are long gone, the charcoal-burner says, they are not completely forgotten. Contradicting the otherworldly woman, he portrays Guingamor as persisting in memory; split in existence between a physical self out of joint with time, and a ghostly reputation spanning the gap.

Guingamor has thus become a hero reminiscent of Arthur—renowned for valor, vanished into a specific (and perhaps faintly mystical) place under doubtful circumstances, and living eternally through story. Moreover, the knight has succeeded in his quest, gaining the immortal fame he sought in seeking the boar. But his return from occultation is no glorious or salvific re-entry into communal existence. Rather, the hero returned from the otherworld is incapable of acting directly upon the later history into which he re-emerges. That future-present is a hostile, even toxic environment, where basic sustenance becomes potentially fatal. In this, as other commentators have pointed out, Guingamor's trial resembles the Fall with which the mortal era began. Catapulted forward in time, Guingamor seems to find himself returned to its beginning. His only purpose in this new world is to add a coda to his story; then, there is nothing left for him to do but re-embrace *esluinement*.

His doing so is among the core differences between this tale and its analogues, including the earlier Seven Sleepers legend, Walter Map's roughly contemporaneous account of King Herla, and, much later, Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*. The text seems quite clear that Guingamor does not intend to linger in modern Brittany. He explicitly deputizes the charcoal-burner to deliver his hunting trophy and tell his story; following this, he takes his leave. Only with his course set does he give into hunger and eat the apple which causes him to wither, to lurch out of the parahuman existence in which he has been suspended and back into time. The

ambiguity over his end—whether or not the otherworld restores him to immortality—again mirrors Arthur's doubtful future.

It is this melancholy end which, to me, works most strongly against Sturm's reading of the *lai* as "a symbolic representation of the struggle by a hero to overcome the forces of moral degradation," a quest to vanquish *luxuria* in which Guingamor is successful and so achieves eternal life.[364] Where Sturm sees heaven, Green (drawing on Jacques Le Goff) prefers a purgatorial interpretation of heterochronic otherworlds.[365] (As Catherine Velay-Vallantin has pointed out though, time going too *quickly* in this elsewhere-from-which-return-is-possible, rather than agonizingly slowly, perhaps manifests a form of popular resistance to clerical doctrine.)[366] Ultimately, however, the poem seems less interested in these theological resonances than in the nature of time and narrative. Reappearance from a supernatural land is depicted not as a triumphant moment of national redemption, à la Arthur's dreamed return, but as a tragic chronological displacement. Yet Guingamor's reappearance reinscribes fantastic possibility into the present; re-enchants an era in which stories are merely told into one in which they might also happen, or at least find closure. The parahuman here is that force which mediates renown as an ahistorical (even antihistorical) phenomenon, achievable only through loss and alienation. Its seductions are those of an escape from the ever-increasing tangle of time, the chronicle of entropy exemplified in the wickedly overgrown trees of Guingamor's woods, or the mounting heap of catastrophe from which, Benjamin writes, Klee's angel cannot look away.[367] Yet it is an

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[364] Sturm, *Guingamor*, 114-116.
[365] Green, *Elf Queens*, 191-192.
[366] Catherine Velay-Vallantin, "Le roi Herla au pays de Galles: Lectures nationalistes du voyage dans l'autre monde," *Marvels & Tales* 25, no. 2, *In Honor of Jacques Barchilon* (2011): 279.
[367] Benjamin, "Concept," 392.

escape that preserves the power to reinject itself into historic time; to stage encounters between a lost past and an estranged present, which can only then come together in narrative.

Conclusion

Manic Pixie Dreams

This chapter has focused on an ineffable class of beings in a problematic medieval genre. The poems often called "Breton *lais*," it has argued, are really neither *lais* nor especially Breton. Instead, they arise from the particular literary project of one twelfth-century Frenchwoman. Yet this project was always deeply interested in the narrative possibilities that emerged from the border zones in which Brittonic peoples met the encroaching political and cultural dominance of French and/or English kingdoms with varied strategies of assimilation and resistance. Marie and her successors crafted poems that stage the Brittonic past as a lost yet tantalizingly close site capable of hosting encounters between humans and various forms or states of alterity. Epitomizing these confrontations are the creatures I term parahumans. Rather than gesturing towards a discrete category of "fairies/*fées*" beholden to long-lost myths or folkloric taxonomies, these entities embody modes of being out of sync with historical culture, space, and time. Through their erotic interactions with humans—particularly the alienated and/or queered—they both seduce these estranged figures into altered worlds and chronologies, and implant fundamental alterity at the heart of hegemonic histories.

Considering this latter trope, the first section emphasized both the importance of lineage to medieval noble identity, and the openness that many medieval people evinced to welcoming the nonhuman into their genealogies. In *Guigemar*, parahuman romance becomes mediated and ultimately domesticated through a series of supernatural journeys between worlds and times. *Yonec* portrays this erotic summoning of the past as a force with the power to revenge sexual injustice at the cost of ontological certainty. In *Tydorel*, however, this doubt consumes both the hybrid offspring born of two worlds and the narratives that assuage his alienation.

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Tydorel's disappearance into the opacity of his ancestry bridges this first set of tales with the second, a closely clustered set of poems that dramatize the disappearance of a young knight into a now-foreclosed otherworld. With a liberatory leap, the hero of *Lanval* becomes freed from history's calamities. But *Graelent* lays bare the gendered stakes of the parahuman encounter, pondering the traumas that such affairs leave in their wake. Lastly, in *Guingamor*, the chronological alterity of supernatural is literalized. The young knight becomes a sacrifice by which the parahuman effects the encounter between past and present and produces narrative. In this tale of seductive beings and weirded time, the themes of this dissertation come full-circle.

Many scholars have sensed revolutionary potential in the figure of the parahuman. For Richard Firth Green, such beings' appearances in medieval stories were always "ideologically loaded." Drawing on Gramsci's notions of folklore's ability to resist hegemony, he wonders if tales of parahumans performed subversive functions.[368] But where exactly does this subversion lie? Green notes how Marie's poems specifically "offer a vision of frank sexual gratification that lies beyond the reach of stifling patrilineal regulation."[369] Through their mere presence, supernatural beings valorize a reversal of the normal moral valences of adultery, sin, and murder, as illustrated most dramatically in the concluding scene of *Yonec*.[370] Michael Faletra observes how Marie's works in general muster sympathy for subalterns and hybrids, and so "work subtly against the interests even of her courtly Anglo-Norman audiences, disallowing any straightforward or comfortable understanding of chivalric identity on the frontier."[371] As noble knights leave the court to seek eroticized fulfillment, they "thereby threaten to destroy the fabric of social cohesion presumptively guaranteed by the king, whose authority thus proves to be

[368] Green, *Elf Queens,* 72-74.
[369] Green, *Elf Queens,* 101.
[370] MacCornack, "Adultère," 101.
[371] Faletra, "Chivalric Identity," 38.

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rather shaky and untrustworthy."[372] Aisling Byrne writes that to imagine spaces "removed from the known world, where time potentially moves at a different rate to historical time, and where the usual laws of human mortality may not necessarily apply, erodes certain sources of authority within the actual world." The myth of Arthur's return from parahuman existence in Avalon, in particular, suggests that "kingly succession in historical time is not as fixed and inevitable as it might appear to be."[373]

What is the link, however, between these politicized subversions and the plots of the poems, all of which foreground erotic relationships between men and women? Barbara Fass Leavy begins her meditation on the "swan maiden" tale type—a pattern she generalizes to touch on virtually all the poems examined here, many of which her book refers to by name—by proposing a deceptively simple explanation for the story pattern's global ubiquity. "[I]n most of the cultures that retained it and that were reflected in its variants, woman *was* a symbolic outsider, was the *other*, and marriage demanded an intimate involvement in a world never quite her own. The stories' themes depict this estrangement."[374] For her, the involvements of supernatural actors "seem to be *about* the freedom from cultural necessity as well as about the requirement that such necessity eventually prevail."[375] Leavy's reading of traditional narratives holds "that for woman the conflicts between nature and culture on one hand, and fantasy and reality on the other, are more problematical than for man, because woman's usual position in society makes the lure of raw nature and the appeal of the otherworld potentially even more enticing than they are for man."[376]

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[372] Albrecht Classen, "Outsiders, Challengers, and Rebels in Medieval Courtly Literature: The Problem with the Courts in Courtly Romances," *Arthuriana* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 69.
[373] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 123.
[374] Leavy, *Swan Maiden,* 2.
[375] Leavy, *Swan Maiden,* 12.
[376] Leavy, *Swan Maiden,* 232.

In acknowledging that the *lais* are intimately concerned with sexual ethics, this study is indebted to Leavy's work. But in opening avenues for the consideration of colonized and queer identity, it suggests that this allure of parahuman space extends to all those whose memories of loss and oppression cannot help but challenge hegemonic historical narratives. In a conservative and patriarchal society, the imagining of other worlds is always an act with radical potential. To identify those worlds as "past," furthermore, is to offer a critique both on the present and on the processes of historical memory that are used to fashion it.

In an effort to limit the definition of her central term, Byrne asks rhetorically: "Should, for instance, the past be thought of as an otherworld? After all, the observation that marvels and wonders were more common in previous times than the present is not unusual in medieval writing…"[377] Her lack of an answer implies a negative assessment. But in this chapter, and the dissertation at large, I have attempted to argue the opposite case. For writers interested in relating the alienating complexity of their lives to the profound alterity of historical ones, the past was indeed an otherworld—perhaps the only one there ever really was.

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[377] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 5.

General Conclusion

Once and Future Worlds

In Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," a linguist attempting to communicate with an alien species discovers that the extraterrestrial language only makes sense when she abandons notions of sequentiality and causality. The radially-symmetric heptapods, instead, seem to view all times simultaneously. As the scientist immerses herself more and more in their language, she too begins to gain access to alien temporality. She becomes aware of events from her own future: her marriage, her daughter's birth, her divorce, and her daughter's untimely death in a climbing accident. Yet attempting to avoid this tragedy would signal a re-embrace of a causal chronology that she has already abandoned. Instead, she feels compelled to bring about the life that is, for her, always already having happened.[1] Her experience with profound otherness opens her to a new form of discourse, which in turn triggers a fundamentally altered perception of time. This has been the primary argument of this dissertation: that the uncanny encounters with strange creatures, parahumans, and time itself that punctuate medieval narratives of the past represent speculative attempts to reconfigure history into unprecedented shapes that also, paradoxically, represent originary truths.

In the introduction, I explored the intersection between two critical categories, "speculative fiction" (usually referring to the science fiction and fantasy literature of the modern era) and "the global Middle Ages" (usually referring to the complex socioeconomic, political, and cultural networks connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa, c. 500-1500 CE). It posited that speculative fiction can be expanded to include the imaginative literature of the past, and that the

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[1] Ted Chiang, "Story of Your Life," in *Stories of Your Life and Others* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 91-146.

global Middle Ages can be conceptualized not only in terms of concrete linkages but also as a particular project of identity-building occurring in parallel among disparate groups. The intersection of these categories suggests that an imaginative engagement with the past was key to medieval sociocultural formations, an observation that provides the basis for the rest of the dissertation. This is organized into three "macro-chapters," each delving into a particular speculative trope in a particular literary ecosystem.

"Past and Paradox: What Did It Mean to Time-Travel in Medieval Wales?" began by tracing the emergence in tenth-century Wales of a historical narrative that centered around ancestral loss and deferred redemption. The chapter then turned to a discussion of four Middle Welsh texts—*Culhwch ac Olwen*, *Branwen ferch Llyr*, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, and Dafydd ap Gwilym's poem "Yr Adfail"—which draw on this ambivalent relationship to the past in order to produce representations of weirded time. Characters journey into the distant past and project themselves forward to the end of the universe in imaginative texts that critique the notion of a stable and recoverable history.

In "Hostile Others: What Did It Mean to Battle the Draconic in the Medieval Iranian World?", I argued that the *azhdahā*, a monstrous reptilian creature of New Persian epic, is not an atavistic remnant of Indo-European mythology but rather the speculative innovation of a group of poets writing in the 11th and 12th centuries CE. Ferdowsi, Asadi-Tusi, and Iranshāh use the *azhdahā* to interrogate ideas of human historical agency vis-à-vis nature, technology, and sexuality.

Finally, "Seductive Others: What Did It Mean to Love the Otherworldly in Medieval France?" considered narratives in the so-called "Breton *lais*" of Marie de France and her anonymous contemporaries, in which humans become involved in sexual liaisons with the

parahuman denizens of other worlds. These relationships insert irreducible strangeness into noble genealogies while occulting historical actors into zones of unattainable alterity.

In juxtaposing these tropologically- and culturally-focused analyses, this dissertation leaves largely unaddressed the question of how any one of these speculative themes functions in the other two literary ecosystems. While specific figures have been used to suggest links between the chapters (such as the Twrch Trwyth's *azhdahā*-like qualities, the parahuman nature of Zahhāk, and Guingamor's journey through time), the larger cultural role of time-travel in Persian and French, monstrosity in Welsh and French, or the parahuman in Welsh and Persian remain to be explored. Weirded temporality is certainly at work in the Middle Persian *Ayādgār-ī Zarērān* and *Ayādgār-ī Jāmāspīg*, both of which intertwine ancient utterance and future fulfilment. The Old French *Roman de Merlin* likewise employs the figure of the prophet to enact a dizzying interplay of textuality and chronology. French and Welsh medieval literature have no shortage of antagonists who combine human and reptilian features: the *addanc* of *Pereder fab Efrawg* is both a serpentine water monster and a troglodytic wizard; in *Perlesvaus*, the *Chevalier au Dragon Ardant* ("Knight of the Burning Dragon") gains his epithet from the sentient, fire-breathing shield that he wields. And parahumans abound throughout a vast array of premodern literatures. Persian, with its *pari*, *div*, and *jenn*, and Welsh, with its *ellyllon*, *Coraniaid*, and the folk of Annwfn, are no exceptions. The particular deployment of each and any of these tropes within these other cultural contexts is certainly rich enough to warrant further analysis.

Along the way, this project has also surfaced a number of other speculative themes that link its diverse subjects. The dream of human communication with nonhuman creatures connects Gwrhyr Interpreter of Language's parleys with the Oldest Animals to Rostam's boasting exchanges with the *azhdahā* of Māzāndarān to Guigemar's encounter with the white hind/stag.

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Subterranean spaces hide powerful artifacts like *Branwen*'s cauldron of rebirth, terrible beasts like Borzin-e Āzar's cave-dwelling monster, and even, as in *Yonec*, portals to alternate worlds. More broadly, all three literary ecosystems display a dense intertextuality, in which later works build upon the speculative worlds established in their predecessors and so reward genre-savvy readers. *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* both references specific characters from *Culhwch ac Olwen* and literalizes that text's suggestions of access to alternate, and earlier, temporalities. The brutal conclusion of the *Bahmannāmeh* relies on a familiarity with the tropes of *azhdahā* encounter established in the *Shāhnāmeh* and *Garshāspnāmeh* to achieve its shocking effect. Without the popularity of *Lanval*, it is hard to understand the unsettling ways in which *Graelent* distorts the motifs of parahuman romance.

In their imaginative attempts to conjure past alterities, speculative fictions of the global Middle Ages reify the medieval as a key site of identity formation. Little wonder, perhaps, that far-right movements in Europe, America, and the Iranian world turn readily to the medieval age and its cultural productions as expressions of a true ethnic essence. But what these violent misappropriations fail to understand from their fetishized texts is the fictive act that brings speculative pasts into being. Communities are anterior to their origin myths. As Berger and Luckmann famously declare:

> *All* societies are constructions in the face of chaos. The constant possibility of anomic terror is actualized whenever the legitimations that obscure the precariousness are threatened or collapse. And in such situations, or more regularly in ceremonially created periods of crisis—literally: separation between two eras, situations, periods—a 'deep legitimacy' is required, referring to a mythical reality outside ours, the 'other reality', lying beyond the borders of history and space, an eternal truth that existed before time but still exists behind it and behind our reality, and occasionally mingles with ours in 'periods of exception'.[2]

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[2] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 121.

The global Middle Ages begins in a series of local "periods of crisis," and ends in a universal one, the cataclysms that reverberated from the events of 1492. Whether the resulting period—our blithely termed "modernity"—has in turn run its course remains to be seen, though the recent declaration of a new geological epic, the Anthropocene, suggests in multiple ways that just such a separation is indeed underway. If many now seek "deep legitimacy" in mythic sources of identity, the terms on which they do so are vital. A fascistic right wing insists on the search for a fetishized purity, now allegedly diluted by the entropic interminglings of history. Against this might be arrayed those who raise their voices against the dread of being forever silenced; Jāmāsp promising his king that despite the coming slaughter, neither the past nor the future will be forgotten; Aneirin forever singing the names of the dead from his makeshift grave.

It is here that a close attention to medieval mythmaking processes is so crucial, that the generation of narrative from the ruins of history reveals its nature as katabasis. "The attempt to attain knowledge of the past is also a journey into the world of the dead,"[3] Carlo Ginzburg observes. As Bruce Lincoln points out,[4] this shamanic account of historical inquiry is linked indelibly to Walter Benjamin's dictum: "The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious."[5] Benjamin wrote this in 1940, with the world ending all around him and his own death from fascist-induced despair mere months away. For those who lived through the Holocaust, the pain of surviving with knowledge of all that had been lost fed into an anxiety of

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[3] Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 24.
[4] Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges*, 52.
[5] Benjamin, "Concept," 391.

irrecoverability. It is here that narrative arises—of how things came to be, how they might have been or still could be otherwise.

Stories of the past are walls against forgetfulness. To speculate about lost times is to invent new forms of destiny, which both explode the neat trajectory by which then becomes now and opens this refashioned history to incursions by alterity and the uncanny. This inquiry is driven by a fear of extinction, which is why time or fate, the dragon, the devourer, so often depicted as the god of an older age lurking at the border of the present, is the worst demon that stories can imagine. Yet otherness has another face—the parahuman whose love promises to weird the human world into unprecedented forms; to offer escape across the relentless rivers of chronology into another reality altogether.

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